

## Language and Time in the Work of Reinhart Koselleck

Before entering my subject I would like to explain, why I didn't hold to the title "Remembrance and Time" which Bo had given me, having changed it to "Language and Time". Indeed, remembrance is one of the major concepts in Koselleck's later work. Many of you will have heard about his engagement in discussions on political monuments such as the Holocaust memorials in Berlin – arguing that the Germans, being the perpetrators are not allowed to organize memory of the victims on the perverse lines of the Nazi-elite – and his strong resistance to some aspects of modern theory of memory – arguing that there are recollections of the past which are cemented in memory such as frozen lava. But still, in Koselleck's basic theory of time, Erinnerung (remembrance) is not a basic concept. In this he didn't agree with Hans Robert Jauss and his school which today dominates the debate on Gedächtnis-Geschichte (history of memory) in Germany. Much more important for him is the concept of Erfahrung (experience), but both are based in the concept of language the true item of Koselleck's theory of history. *In Koselleck's approach to history and society language was sedimented experience*

In 1972 in his final lecture at the German Historikertag in Köln, Reinhart Koselleck, by this time professor for modern history at Heidelberg university, asked for a „theory of historical times“, giving the art of academic historiography a more stable fundament in the concert and crisis of humanities around 1970. It was a time when, stimulated by the student revolt and under the intellectual attack of the social sciences, humanities made efforts to redefine their subject in giving themselves a more theoretical design. The "theory of historical times", Koselleck argued, would give history what it needed to face competition; it would give answers to questions about what history was about. His argument was: Since in all other aspects history had nothing for its own, dealing with items which were subject to other parts of humanities as well (such as economics and politics, arts and literature, anthropology and ethnology), the subject of historical time – (the knowledge) how things changed over time -- seemed to be the only one which could be defined as the proper essence of history in its appearance as historical science. *concrete objects*

Beside the message for the scientific community, by the time this at once was taken for a personal program of Koselleck himself. In Bochum and Bielefeld, the most ambitious newcomers among the German universities of the 60s, chairs for the theory of history were established and Koselleck himself went to Bielefeld, where he stayed for the rest of his life time, making Bielefeld university to one of the outstanding places of historical research in the world. In the following years many colleagues expected him to outline the advertised scheme for the new theory of history, such as in his "Historik" Johann Gustav Droysen had done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Koselleck's colleague Jörn Rüsen began to establish at Bochum univer-

sity. But Koselleck did not publish such a book, only in 1979 – under the title of “Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten” (Past future. Contributions to the semantics of historical times) – a volume of scattered papers. The message of this book was twofold: first, it made clear that Koselleck didn’t aim for establishing a coherent building of theory, called the “theory of historical times”, and second that speaking about historical times one would have to deal with language, the semantics of historical concepts. Both indeed pointed to some at this time very unusual directions.

As you may know, Reinhart Koselleck wanted to become a cartoonist before he began to engage in history and philosophy. This indeed is important for understanding Kosellecks scientific design: Cartoons represent pictures of certain aspects of reality by picking out and giving importance to certain lines. There is a certain aesthetic economy in cartoons: Cartoons ask for a certain minimum of signs, lines and colours, but in doing this they create a whole world of meaning by drawing a very ascetic picture of things. This seemed to be true for Kosellecks theory of history as well: More than in drawing a coherent picture of the past he was interested in describing certain patterns of past reality, and more than establishing a theory from the bottom of certain philosophical principles, he wanted to give evidence to a set of very simple ideas. For these ideas he found convincing catchwords such as “Vetorecht der Quellen” (the right of historical sources to deny certain interpretations of reality), “Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont” (the space of experience and the horizon of expectations), “vergangene Zukunft” (past future) and others.

In my eyes this “technic” of inventing historical hypotheses which aim to encourage historical investigations by widening the eyes for new problems and methods (rather than to cover their existing practice) was one of the secrets of Kosellecks success in the scientific community. He didn’t want to tell historians what they had to do but rather he wanted to open new paths for exploring the past. We was not interested into theories and concepts as such, but only as means for describing reality. Historians usually are much more committed to new pictures of the past, than to building up new theories of reality, more committed to the concrete items of the past than to their abstract outline.

So Koselleck never published the expected “theory of history”. For him the preferred form of writing about historical times was the short essay, not the exhaustive treatise. This is why we have a lot of marvellous essays about certain elements which are concerned with historical times, but not The theory of historical time as a book. Furthermore, in all his essays the argument was based on sensuous, perceptible evidence rather than on abstract notions. Koselleck argued by giving examples, starting from past experiences and unquestionable facts, but afterwards binding them up to something new and unexpected. For the historian it is easy to work with Koselleck basic concepts, ideas and hypothesis, because each of them seems to be evident in itself, without reference to certain basic philosophical assumptions. So up to last week I myself was convinced that Kosellecks theory of historical times was nothing more than a sample of ingenious, but scattered, unsystematic concepts, inventions

and insides. But today, overlooking all the aspects of what may be called Kosellecks theory of historical times, I am not sure about this any more.

The reason for this new impression is, that it is not very difficult to find some very basic assumptions in Kosellecks approach to historical time: One is, he is convinced that we, as historians, cannot speak about time without reference to language. Time and language are the two cornerstones of Kosellecks theoretical work. They are intertwined in mutual contexts of interference: Time is bound to language as much as language is bound to time – but in the practice of theoretical arguments they are not based on one another at the same time. We have to follow both lines, but not at once. And here we at once come to the second basic assumption: In order to describe and explain historical change we have to hold on something stable. Confronted with the need to describe and explain historical change Koselleck referred to various human sciences: anthropology, law, linguistics, philosophy and others: For him they were the necessary sources of stability for any theoretical investigation what so ever. But different to other philosophers of history such as Droysen or Arnold Gehlen in Kosellecks argument this operation never took the shape of a cemented picture of human relations, but served for nothing but heuristic purposes. So, he for instance would take the opposite concepts of “friend” and “enemy” or of “master” and “servant” as part of the anthropological condition of all human societies; but of course, in other contexts he would have agreed to historicizing these concepts in the well known way of conceptual history. You need to have some stable assumptions for exploring historical change, he would argue. Beside concepts these also could be assumptions about historical change such as the four assumptions he underlayed his lexicon on Begriffsgeschichte: democratization, politization, ideologization and temporalization.

In my paper I would like to draw two lines of argument in Kosellecks theory of historical time: first his concern for the linguistic models and second his concern for the genesis of historical time.

### *1. Past present and present past: two levels of historical investigation*

One of Kosellecks basic ideas in the conceptualisation of historical methodology is to distinguish between the natural time of history, the historical chronology, and the time of human experience: the one represented by Aristotle's model of “objective” time, the other by Saint Augustin's model of “subjective” time. This is the philosophical background for his famous concept of the “past future” (and similar concepts like “past present” and “present past”): “Past future” refers to the subjective ideas of past generations of what was going to come, ideas which in most cases evidently differed from what later turned out to come in fact or, what later generations learned to had come: their “present past” and “present future”. For Koselleck the field of history, the field of facts and fantasies, either experienced or expected, extended between the present past and the past present. What this means may be explained in three steps:

- first, the concept of a past present opened a new field for historical research: What people in the past believed to be the case, what they believed to be their past and what their future, the field of past experiences, expectations, recollections etc. But according to Koselleck these past knowledges always have to be seen in interference with what we today know about the same time, the same items. In the framework of earlier historiography the knowledge of the past usually was rejected and condemned as having turned out to be wrong, deceptive, illusive. Only the present "scientific" knowledge was accepted as "true" knowledge. This concept was no longer valid.
- So second, taking the past present for serious Koselleck maintained that past knowledges, or rather: past concepts of reality, had to be taken as to be as real as present concepts of reality. According to him descriptions of the past had to refer to two diverging levels of world experience: the structures of past and the structures of present descriptions of the past, documented and expressed on the one hand in the linguistic concepts of historical sources and on the other in the concepts of present scientific communities. By this historical narratives adopted the form of a multiperspective approach to the past. This was something completely new. Whereas the analysis of social history (as much as of earlier schools of historiography) based on the idea, that the historian had to take the facts from the sources of the past, but the basic ideas, concepts and theories from his own time and imagination, conceptional history made clear that this division of labour was wrong. For the sources of the past offered more than facts, they, too, offered ideas, concepts and theories about the world, as much as our present perception of the world.
- So third, conceptional history widened structural history to the comparison of two semantic levels, the language of the sources and the language of present scientific analysis and description, maintaining that only in the narrative space between both levels history would be become self-reflective. For conceptional history it is most important that basic historical concepts have to be seen and to be used both as tools and as images of past reality: as "tools" ("factors") in following their use in past actions, i.e. in what people "did" by using them in certain situations; but as "images" by following the meaning or the reference-function of concepts. Both aspects belong together and can't do without one another.

What is this important for in the context of Koselleck's concept of historical time: I should resume his theory of concepts by pointing to the fact that for Koselleck historical time was a hybrid: on the one hand a necessary dimension of historical narratives, given for the purpose of now-a-days orientation in the world, but on the other hand a changing dimension of time-production, too. To put it in other words: Historical time had to be perceived as something generated by man himself: by certain semantic concepts such as "earlier" and "later", "before" and "after", "once" and "than", or by the threefold concept of "past", "present" and "future" (which did not exist in all times and societies), or by modern concepts such as "development" and "progress", "reform" and "revolution", "rise" and "fall".

## *II. The emergence of historical time in the 18<sup>th</sup> century*

In following this idea of a history of historical time Koselleck collected a branch of basic concepts dealing with what was modern in the concept of historical time. This type of analysis was mainly focused on the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called "Sattelzeit", where the premodern world turned to the modern world and the modern concept of history "came to its own". Let us take some of his most important ideas dealing with this essential turn of and to history:

1. For Koselleck "time" in the modern historical sense, used in linguistic figures such as "Zeitalter" and "Zeitgeist", is a highly abstract concept: As he showed in one of his most brilliant essays on the concept "Neuzeit" older concepts referring to historical periods, such as the "golden" or the "iron age", always were bound to certain contents (such as the metal in this case). This was true of the "middle ages", too, a concept invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for labelling the dark period of time between antiquity and modern times. Only by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the newly invented concept "Neuzeit" time was deprived of all specific ideas about what this period was about: The concept stood for changing contents. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Koselleck argued, time became to be a historical subject in its own, a motor of historical progress – without reference to empirical historical subjects such as the industrial revolution or the proletariat in Karl Marx' theory on historical materialism.

2. The same change of quality of historical time was addressed by the concepts "Erfahrungsraum" and "Erwartungshorizont" (the space of experience and the horizon of expectations). Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Koselleck argued, what people expected to come in the future was in principle the same as what they had experienced in the past: But from now on expectation differed from experience, people were convinced that the future would realise things which never had happened before. This again was conceptualised in new concepts such as "society" and "nation", "democracy" and "republic", "progress", "utopia" and "revolution" From now on the repetitive structure of past experience contrasted to the constantly changing structure of the future.

3. And even more: Following Koselleck the new age of the "Neuzeit" was basically characterised by acceleration: the acceleration of material production, of traffic, of population growth and even of experience itself: What older generations had witnessed within the period of many centuries, he argued, now-a-days was witnessed within the life-time of one generation. Again, we may observe Kosellecks interest in the human experience of time and its relation to material, social and physical processes in history.

4. There are more characteristics of modern times, described by Koselleck in small theoretical designs: one is the perspective approach to the past, i.e. the fact, that modern historiography bases on the assumption that the image we have of the past is always something refracted by the prism of our own point of view. In this again modern times differ from older ages: in their picture of the world the past was something stable, invariant to the progress of time. But in modern times it is not only the future which changes constantly but also the past,

i.e. our image of the past. In this the present and the future is the new cornerstone of all history.

5. Time in modern times is regulated, addressed and aimed to some future telos. In caring for the future people in modern times live up to a certain utopian idea, for instance the prospect of a future form of society. This for instance allows to speak of "more" and "less" advanced societies: By speaking in this way people imply that the more advanced societies have passed a stage of development already now which the latecomer will come to only later. This is what Koselleck calls "die Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen" (the coexistence of the unsynchronic). It is one of the basic instruments as much of politics as of prognostics, but only possible on the background of the modern concept of progressive history.

6. Finally, I would like to mention the concept of "crisis" and of "Übergangszeit" (period of transition): In changing to something new in modern times every present is diagnosed as being a period of crisis and transition. There is no decade in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century which was not labelled in such a way by the contemporaries. Very near to this are the concepts of "reform" and "revolution", which in modern days have changed their meaning, not pointing any more to a kind of return to the better days of yesterday but to something new and so far unknown in the future.

I should come to the end: What Koselleck's theory of historical times is concerned with is the subjective experience of time, made by historical individuals and conceptualised in linguistic concepts. In his history of historical time-experience the 18<sup>th</sup> century appears to be the turning point, establishing a new quality of time. Koselleck calls it the "historical time" in the proper sense of a secular concept of history which, living in itself, does without referring to some divine creator outside the world. There are some very basic operations to be found at the bottom of his theory such as the distinction between what happens only once, the event (Ereignis), and what happens again and again, the structure (Struktur). But in the end, what comes out is something very differentiated and sophisticated: a design of history which may be characterised by two basic assumptions: the assumption, that the structures of historical time are based in language, and the assumption that historical narratives have to be self-reflective. In describing by means of historical development what he presupposed in the beginning by means of anthropological settings Koselleck fulfilled this demand.