

## CONCEPTUAL HISTORY, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH REINHART KOSELLECK<sup>1</sup>

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**JFS/JFF** Among the many subjects you have worked on throughout your career, we would like to concentrate on those related to the methodology of intellectual history, especially conceptual history. We will then go on to make you a few questions about your recent work on memory and identity.

### CONCEPTUAL HISTORY: QUESTIONS ON METHOD.

**JFS/JFF** As historians interested in how your reflections on method come to play with historiography, we would like to say that your work has made us reconsider the relationship between old and new, tradition and innovation. In this sense, some of the basic premises of *Begriffsgeschichte*, in our opinion, greatly contribute to expose the misleading nature of the dichotomy between continuity and rupture, a separation that traditionally undermines the adequate comprehension of change and of future historical developments. Getting over the *faux* dilemma which pits continuity against rupture, permanence against innovation – which linguistically can be approached by your proposal of what could be called “diachronic synchronicity,” which are the layers of time – undoubtedly adds to and refines historical analysis. Now, as you have many times stated, given that reality can never be encompassed by language, that there is always an insurmountable gap between facts and concepts, what is your opinion on the use of categories such as continuity and rupture as heuristic tools in factual history? Does it seem to you that this polarization might still be useful, or should it be abandoned?

**RK** The categories of continuity and rupture are still useful. The question is at what level or to what set of events should they be applied. If we look at political history we will notice that there is a great number of ruptures. Meanwhile, in linguistic history, for example, there are much fewer – continuous transformation and gradual transformation are the main trends. In contrast, political events frequently destroy continuities. Often, revolutionary events or reforms follow rupture. At the political and social level and at the linguistic and economic level, there are different forms of continuity and different forms of rupture, and the most difficult task is to establish an adequate relationship between all these different forms and levels of rupture. The latest stage of German history is a good example of this. East Germany was quickly integrated into the new German republic. At the political level, it was a very rapid process, lasting only a year or so. Furthermore, both counterparts in the East and West easily accepted integration. However, integration of mentalities from both sides still lags behind. Fifteen years later, or, in other words, for half a generation, this change still does not represent any substantial increase in communication between the eastern and western portions of the country. In the midst of this, a very complicated economic integration is under way and is also occurring at a pace slower than expected. This example proves that there are different levels of analysis that should be taken into account in any debate about continuity and rupture.

**JFS/JFF** One of the greatest challenges faced by historians consists of having to deal with a set of accumulated events and discourses which contradictorily present themselves as unique and as repetition. Therefore, speaking of/referring to the historicist emphasis on the singularity of each historical event, you have stated in many situations that history is full of recurring structures and phenomena. Is history composed of truly recurring phenomena, or are repetitions simply analogies historians project from his or her own perspective to the words and facts of the past? It would be definitely possible to find coincidences between the English Revolution and the French Revolution, between the historical paths followed by Cromwell and Napoleon, or between speeches registered by Thucydides and other political arguments formulated centuries over the centuries. However, is it correct to treat these and other

similar cases as bearing a repetitive structure, or at least as more or less similar events unfolding in fundamentally different contexts? On the other hand, if we apply this same logic to the history of political thought, would it be possible to take for granted the existence of “perennial issues?” Accepting this would be going against the arguments convincingly put forth by Quentin Skinner almost four decades ago.

**RK** In order to properly answer this question I would have to mobilize an enormous amount of thoughts and historical transformations of great scope and reflect on it as a whole. For example, it is perfectly possible that in certain passages of the Bible or in the works of Plato we could find certain arguments that would be useful for today’s political strategies. It is interesting to think about the possible transformations of our political arguments and strategies based on these arguments. It is a well-known fact that in Ancient Greece plenty of thought was given to the question of the equality of citizens, the best way to preserve the liberty of citizens, active or passive administration, etc. And in all this literature it is possible to identify, of course, an ideal type of democracy, that is, a political model according to which the people governs itself (albeit in the limited realm of the polis). Of course this model is in no way identical to the Florentine or French model or any other model, however the structure of the argument repeats itself and I would not go as far as saying that this is a superficial similarity. I believe that the similarities prove that there are deep connections between problems that are formulated and lived out differently, and I believe that the similarity of structures goes beyond what we have been used to learn from today’s historians who tend to overlook similarities and common structures. The ordinary historian would rather leave these subjects out, assuming that they belong to theologians or sociologists, and limit his or her work only to the study of concrete, singular facts derived from singular sources. Take, for example, the historical sources that refer to the fascist period in Spain. I am sure that there are many documents from this era. But these primary sources do not usually contain references to the repetitive elements in them. We will seldom find explicit references to recurring factors in this type of ideological movement, unless it is an ideology such as French Jacobinism. The

Jacobines represented themselves as true Romans. That is how they were portrayed by Jacques-Louis David, with an ideology mirroring that of the virtuous Romans of the republican period. However, of course, there is no such thing. It was a promise of salvation, at the ideological level, for those who were part of the sect of Jacobine party. Therefore, there are actually few useful analogies for a democracy produced by the participation of all and the question of how to make common political decisions remains a challenge. Beneath the argument in favor of direct democracy, or at least representative democracy, we will rarely find new arguments. Even when novel situations arise arguments are adapted from the past. And this constitutes a technique or art, a historical art that consists of linking chains of events in a broad long-term perspective that includes the discovery of recurring structures.

**JFS** But, going beyond these unquestionable analogies, the question is whether the different concepts of democracy – direct democracy, representative democracy etc. – that are manipulated by actors throughout the centuries through discourse actually refer to the same concept. Or would they be concepts that become of importance depending upon certain circumstances, although the structure of arguments and strategies remain basically the same?

**RK** Not necessarily. We must understand in which sense we are facing perennial or constant questions, in what measure are we dealing with problems that, although unique, are persistent and respond to permanent challenges, and furthermore, how do we sometimes deal with questions that are truly unique, singular, and unprecedented. If we distinguish these three levels, we will be able to discuss them and find singularities as well as recurring patterns. For example, during the Middle Ages there was a duality that made different authorities oppose each other, theological and civil, monastic and urban, with the Church opposing civil power. It is evident that the dual constitution of Medieval Europe is not similar to that of Athens at the time of Aristotle, although Saint Thomas of Aquinas uses many Aristotelian arguments probably because of the many similarities between Florentine democracy and Athenian democracy. There is no doubt that in both cases the problem was restricted to that of government of a small number of citizens. The structural

analogy is not as strong, although the issues it raises are never too different, given that they surface due to certain conditions that bear resemblance with old situations. The historian has the duty to occupy himself with these analogies, because if we simply look at singular events as radically unique events we will never be able to explain them. We will not be able to explain them because something will always be missing. Any explanation, including those directed to the explanation of a single event, depends on the course of action, of the sequence of events...

**JFS** The purely synchronic explanation is not an explanation...

**RK** Certainly, it is not. Combining and integrating the synchronic and diachronic perspectives is always necessary, one must always take both dimensions into account. They cannot be separated from each other. Saussure himself, in his analysis of language, says that the diachronic potential of every language lies in the synchronic situation of speech. In my opinion it is no longer a question of deciding which dimension to use - the synchronic or the diachronic - but rather what must be examined is the capacity of innovation in a language that might be centuries old, and how innovation is produced, for example, as a result of technical change. And as we approach the relationship between old structures and new meanings, it is important to observe the new semantics introduced in the language as a result of new experiences. We must therefore define this complex relationship between old structures and new meanings, but we cannot state that all is new.

From a strictly logical point of view there are two possibilities. If we decide that all is recurring, then nothing would be new, which would be terribly boring. But if we decide that all is new, living would be impossible, because if all that surrounds us were new and surprising, we would lack the knowledge and ability to keep on living. Therefore, a minimum of repetition is required in order to understand what might happen tomorrow. This is exactly the subject of the conference<sup>2</sup> I will be giving tomorrow. Of course, this is what occurs at a purely logical level. In reality, our life experience is always invested with hopes and expectations, and thus we need to understand how these relate to other variables.

**JFS/JFF** In spite of the epistemological challenges faced by the historical sciences in the last decades of the twentieth century and in spite of the debates concerning the so-called linguistic turn and post-modernity, several historians still pursue research practices that are not reflexive and, thus, close to positivism. Since they feel jaded by sterile debates and theories, these historians are not so concerned with methodological questions and in fact state that the analysis of sources are enough to give an adequate interpretation of facts. On the other hand, in the specific field of conceptual history, don't you think that, in addition to *Begriffsgeschichte*, it is possible to apply and practice other approaches?

**RK** The first part of your question does not apply only to factual history, conceptual history, as well, is also unable to explain a certain "incident" or particular event only by including new sources or fashioning new interpretations of existing sources. There is a lack of questions and hypothesis that can be contested and contrasted by specialists in historical semantics and other academics. For example, my project of a lexicon is based on four hypothesis, namely that at a certain point in time (1) language became more democratic and (2) politicized, at a time of (3) strong ideological dispute and (4) internal temporalization of concepts. This is how temporalization between past and future gradually takes shape, while the new structure of language develops. This new structure ends up affecting all concepts.

As for the second question, certainly the historical study of concepts admits several perspectives and approaches. This is what allows us for example to focus our attention and use liberalism as a normative benchmark, which is what seems to be the case with the Spanish lexicon. I however would not adopt such normative benchmark or any other, because my experience with fellow theorists in the field of law, theologians, and jurists is that many of them are incapable of conceiving a descriptive history of concepts, an approach that for some seems to threaten their dogmatic beliefs. Somehow they presume that they know "the truth," that they know which are the "true concepts" that correspond to this or that notion, and they are not willing to admit a conceptual historical analysis that will collide with their own normative views. I have discussed much with some of them, and in not few occasions I had to leave things at that..

The most important theologians frequently incur in errors and misinterpretations because of their prejudices. It would be best if they changed their prejudices into hypothesis. By converting prejudices into hypothesis or into concepts open to debate, we would be able to ask ourselves freely if it is possible or not to accept such thing.

But perhaps I have not understood your question.

**JFS** Yes, I think you are right when you say that our *Diccionario* sometimes contains a certain normative thrust, or, as you have put it, a certain prejudice in favor of liberalism. The reason for our insistence, however, does not follow an ideological *parti pris*, but derives from the fact that it seemed to us that, without a doubt, liberalism constituted the dominant language – and worldview – in nineteenth-century Spain. On the other hand, we certainly have tried to make the writing reflect the dispute and controversy surrounding each concept. By the way it is curious to notice that some modern macroconcepts that express movement – liberalism among them – were initially more frequently employed by their detractors than their champions (in the mass of periodicals and pamphlets connected to the first constitutionalists of Cádiz, for example, the first thing that comes to attention is that the ones who speak of “liberal philosophers” and “liberalism” are precisely those who – as Francisco Alvarado, “El Filósofo Rancio”- most arduously oppose this new philosophical view).

On the other hand, I fully agree with you when you talk about the suspicion and even contempt most jurists hold towards conceptual history. For some of them it is really hard to confer academic legitimacy to a study of the history of concepts unwarranted by a normative perspective. They get nervous when confronted by the simple possibility that the concepts they are so used to work with – which make up their own epistemological grounding – are questioned and converted into something contingent, ambiguous, and unstable. During a recent debate in Paris about the new methods in the history of political thought I could really sense this suspicion.

**JFF** This question reminds me of a statement made by a participant with a background in law at the Bilbao Congress. He said that the concept of property had not varied substantially in centuries, that it has remained quite the same since Roman times (laughter). Yes, that was fun.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that compared to *Begriffsgeschichte* as it is practiced in Germany – completely reconstructing the history of con-

cepts and following words through the course of many centuries – our approach, centered on eighteenth and nineteenth-century Spain, is perhaps more sensitive to semantic transformations that occur in a short span of time and are connected to everyday political conflict.

**RK** Your critique is interesting, but I do not agree with it. It might seem correct in your perception since we are dealing with different academic cultures and projects. The question also depends on, from the beginning, the similarity or compatibility between the language spoken by historical agents and the analysis of the historian, taking into account that language is always inscribed in unique situations, produced within definite and concrete coordinates. At one end of the spectrum, meaning could not change, given that it would always refer to a singular and unique situation. This is an aspect of the conceptualist theory that insists on the singularity or uniqueness of applied language. However, at the other end, we must think about the elements of language that possess a capacity of meaning and possibilities of semantic and syntactical use that have been in constant transformation for the past centuries. At any rate, if words can be applied to concrete and unique situations it is precisely due to the potential, the capacity of meaning, accumulated through constant and continual use of words through the centuries. The recurrence of old usages is what causes translations to reveal different shades and sentence structure to vary, with diverse modulations of depth and length. My hypothesis is, therefore, that a unique, exclusive and long-term process is at work. It is necessary to analyze the roots of each language, the slow pace of long-term changes and also the linguistics applied to concrete situations, as well as adaptations that sometimes give rise to new things.

**JFS/JFF** Your insistence on the need to carefully distinguish between the concrete reality of facts and its linguistic comprehension nevertheless suggests an epistemological problem. Certainly, given that there is no possible experience without concepts - albeit we cannot deny extralinguistic realities - in our post-kantian and post-positivist world it seems hard to imagine any historical event “in itself” that does not rely on the conceptual comprehension of those human observers who articulate facts and give them meaning. Don’t you think that, based on these



premises, it is hard to sustain a strict distinction between “facts” and their linguistic apprehension?

**RK** Yes, theoretically two extreme answers can be given on this issue, both of which would reduce language to a reaction to facts. As such, for some, language is merely a mirror casting a deformed reflection. As Marxism would have it: Being is the guide of consciousness and in fact is stronger than consciousness. This is a position that expresses a radical priority of reality. For others, on the contrary, language mediates everything and, as far as that goes, the priority lies in the linguistic interpretation of facts. What these facts are or are not depends on linguistic interpretation. One may choose between these extreme positions. Both of them can be applied methodologically. If you are able to defend, as a good Marxist, the absolute dependence of ideologies and mentalities on the real conditions of production, why not? Or rather, the other way around, we can follow Gadamer when he says that everything is linguistically determined. But in my view these positions are not enough in order to develop a good investigation and there is no possible convergence between the extreme positions. We always have to choose between one or another direction and this decision always depends on the question originally presented. I would say that the main point here has to do with what you are trying to answer: this is my point of view. Sometimes my socialist colleagues attack me saying that I produce these senseless things, linguistic absurdities that are far from reality. However, I think that they are very naïve in thinking that reality is independent from language. Of course, regardless of how much we insist that reality depends on language, a historian of economics can always reply to that saying: “Very well, but in my work language is simply a helpful tool, while it is the basic necessities and the pressures it causes that make people react and stimulate their linguistic imagination.” The argument therefore depends on the methodological choices made by each one and we can limit ourselves to examine the different arguments and try to understand the different reasons that drive them to oppose each other. Nevertheless, I always insist that whatever direction is taken, there will inevitably be a materialistic or idealistic tilt to it. And this decision is inevitably taken at

the linguistic level. From my perspective, this debate is carried out in the realm of language in such a way that, regardless if you argue that economy is at the origin of everything or that language is the essential factor; regardless of your preference for linguistic or non-linguistic arguments, language is the battlefield. Stating that the decision is linguistic in itself is not the same as attributing priority to language. I simply consider that the mean or factor for this change of opinion is necessarily language, that the theoretical dispute occurs linguistically. I hope that you agree with me on this point.

**JFS** As you know, Juan Francisco Fuentes and I, with the collaboration of around thirty researchers, published in 2002 the *Diccionario de Historia de los Conceptos Políticos y Sociales de la España del Siglo XIX*, and we are currently conducting a project that will result in a new volume covering the twentieth century, which we hope will come out in 2006. In these works we have been partially inspired by *Begriffsgeschichte*, as well as by other methodological approaches, particularly that of the Cambridge School. Like Melvin Richter and Kari Palonen, we think that it is not only possible, but also convenient, to combine the suggestions and reflections of both schools. When we support this eclectic stance our reasons to do so coincide with those of Palonen, namely, the advantages derived from combining the historical semantic analysis of *Begriffsgeschichte*, based on the diachronic depth and internal temporality of concepts, with Quentin Skinner's and the Cambridge School's methodology, which emphasizes rhetoric and the different languages at play at a given moment, paying more attention to the pragmatic aspects and persuasive strategies employed by agents. We would like to know what is your opinion on this, and our question is whether you believe or not in the possibility of integrating both perspectives in order to achieve an appropriate approach to the historical semantics of concepts and the history of political discourses.

**RK** I have attended debates with Skinner and Pocock in the past. The main issues involved in our discussions are still alive today thanks to Richter and Palonen and the point Palonen insists on seems to be the thesis according to which each concept has its own internal temporality. I would like to believe that I have been able to contribute to discovering through my analysis of language that each concept indicates stability or change, and that the division between past and future is internally contained by the concept. That is be-

cause conceptual change or evolution naturally implies a loss of part of the load of the past contained in a concept and the consequent increase in the future expectations it carries, a phenomenon that can be observed especially after the beginning of the nineteenth century. If we want to analyze the progressive element, the trigger for transformation, we must distinguish past from future. It is precisely the internal temporal structure of some concepts that generates temporal differences in the consciousness of speakers. Other concepts nevertheless, can become subject to very small changes over time and become extremely repetitive. When I say “table” I can be referring to the “tabula” of the Romans, or the French or British “table”, being that the use of these concepts does not entail in much variation, or at least temporal changes, in style or function.

However, coming back to the possibility of a synthesis between our method and that of the Cambridge School, the term temporality seems to give rise to certain problems or issues. In any case, I think that both Skinner and Pocock have grasped its meaning and I have the impression that they could go further in their comprehension of this crucial point, but I am afraid that when we have meetings my English is not good enough to answer their objections. Regarding Skinner, who is a very strict historian in the field of hermeneutical history, the true difference is that, in my judgment, his analytical capacity is guided by normative concerns. His analysis of the concepts of freedom and liberty based on seventeenth-century republicanism seems to me excessively normative, and that, for example, leads him to downplay the importance of the vehement discourses of Presbyterian theologians and the arguments of the British revolutionaries impregnated with theology in the context of the Civil War. This is why Skinner strikes me as a conventional historian concerned with a load of normative concepts. It is truly a pity we cannot get together to discuss all of this... In my case, I am pleased to let go of normative concepts (I speak now as a historian; it would be a different thing if we were to talk about politics). I know that anyone could contest my argument saying that there are no concepts void of normative content, but for me that is a political question, and it does not seem adequate to retrospectively apply this implicit normativity to concepts from the past century and to make historical analysis based on it. One has to listen to what people

from the past have said and try to understand what were their original intentions, although the answer to this kind of question can only be found in the development of adequate hypotheses.

**JFS** Maybe the most interesting aspect of Skinner's more recent work is its very refined approach to the rhetorical tools used by historical agents.

**RK** Yes, this can be found, for example, in his recent interpretation of Hobbes. However, at the core of this subject lies a typically repetitive structure. In regards to this subject I shall make some observations in my conference tomorrow. Obviously the linguistic topics are supported by repetition and, therefore, rhetoric is a tool that can be used both in favor of and against change. Thus, it is possible to create something new from a given topography, but its innovative linguistic potential relies on the repetitive power of rhetoric.

**JFS/JFF** During the last months we have embarked on an ambitious project of comparing the conceptual history of the Ibero-american world, which initially entailed the study of a list of ten concepts in five different countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Spain, and Mexico) during the period of transition that goes from 1750 to 1850. Additionally, as you know, Lucian Hölscher and other German academics have proposed a comparative history of European political concepts. Having in mind your discussion in the memorable article "Three bürgerliche worlds" in reference to Germany, England, and France, what would your opinion be concerning the undertaking of a history of European concepts? Does it seem viable to you the comparative study of a handful of concepts in the five main languages of Western Europe?

**RK** Well, such a project might be possible, but, at the same time, riddled with difficulties. I tried to do something of that sort in the 1960s, when I began practicing conceptual history. I visited a comparative literature professor in Paris, whose name I forgot (at my age this happens quite often). He then suggested: "Let's do a comparative conceptual history lexicon encompassing French thought, German thought, English thought...". I believe this, however, to be an almost impossible task. Such a project presents enormous complexity and its completion would require overcoming great difficulties that have to do with the interrelation between languages, times, and cultures. Take for example the use of the word *état* in French, in the sense

of order (group or social category), that is of a status group or class within society, and not “State.” The new meaning of State is the result of the transformation of the old one and only becomes prevalent in the seventeenth century. This duplicity of meaning – *état* at the same time as a status group and as State – also occurs in German with the word *Staat*. Also in German, *Staat*, which for a long time meant status group or social position, acquired the meaning of State sometime toward the end of eighteenth century, but not in the seventeenth century. Thus the same semantic shift occurs in German one and a half century after it had occurred in French. In this manner, if a comparative analysis is made, in addition to historical, lexical and semantic differences of all sorts, it would be necessary to show who takes the lead in processes of transformation and who is behind, as well as the degrees of coordination in the evolution of each concept in different languages and cultures. In addition to the different traditions and historical experiences, it would be necessary to take into consideration chronological differences, which makes this project a very difficult task. Summing it up, it seems to me that it is very hard to solve these methodological problems conveniently.

**JFS** Perhaps the main problem lies in trying to find a common language.

**RK** Exactly. A meta-language would be necessary. This seems clear to me. We need a language capable of incorporating historical and social differences reflected in language. These three experiences we just talked about (France, England, and Germany) create three different worlds. Although sociologically speaking, we can say that at a given moment these three historical experiences are contained within the same stage of capitalism, in reality each one of them is situated very far from the others.

And regarding your comparative conceptual history project, why not compare the shifting languages of the colonizers and Ibero-american populations as a result of the experience of the Spanish and Portuguese in Europe and in America? There is no doubt this project would be more feasible and easy. In comparison it is much more feasible than comparing the case of the English, French, German, and Slavic languages, given that they do not all have a Latin root. French, Spanish, and English have a Latin origin so that every

translation, each adaptation of the Roman language to the vernacular, that is, everyday language, entails a transformation, a change which Saussure convincingly studied and analyzed. Now this continuous and gradual transformation from Latin to modern political terminology of the Western peoples does not occur in Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, or in Poland. Of course, they also had a Latin education, but they either had to integrate Latin voices into their languages or create new words, processes that require a very different form of experimenting with languages. It is a passionate subject and I understand that it would be very interesting to get into it, but it is truly very challenging.

### **MEMORY, CONCEPTS, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES.**

**JFS/JFF** Two other categories or analytical concepts that historiography has brought to the fore in the last decades are memory and collective identity. Starting with this last concept, don't you think that strong political identities such as party, class, nation or gender could be seen as the result of the effective (or affective) acceptance of certain concepts by individuals that make them perceive themselves as essentially belonging – sometimes exclusively as well – to this or that reference collectivity or community? We particularly have in mind certain asymmetrical counter-concepts, upon which identities are built, that become instruments for the exclusion of others and give rise to what a historian of nationalism would call “counter-identities.”

**RK** To start out, I would say that the opposition between the linguistic nation and political nation is an invention of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first concept has been in use since the Versailles Treaty until today as a particularly German ideology, because from the linguistic point of view we are much more a cultural nation than a political nation, and this is why I insist on the linguistic aspect. The French also have a linguistic nation given that, as they did not allow linguistic minorities to flourish in their territory, all must speak French. The Alsatians, the Basques and those living in Brittany speak French and have historically been pushed in that direction by very forceful linguistic policies. Therefore, the linguistic nation is not just a German invention, it also a French practice. However, the ideol-

ogy behind it is another question and is very different in either case. So, if one focuses on detail it would be possible to find national differences that are linguistically masked by different ideologies.

As for identity and collective memory I believe that it strongly depends on linguistic presuppositions of speakers impregnated with ideology. And my personal position concerning this subject is strictly against collective memory, given that I have been submitted to the collective memory of the Nazi years during twelve years of my life. Any kind of collective memory displeases me because I know that true memory is independent from the so-called collective memory, and my position in regards to this is that my memory depends on my experience and nothing else. No matter what else people might say, I know my own personal experiences and I will not forgo any of them. I have the right to keep my personal experiences just as I have memorized them, and the events kept in my memory constitute my personal identity. Memory produced to suit “the collective identity” came from the German seven P’s: professors who produced collective memory, priests, politicians, poets, press... , in short, people who regard themselves as the keepers of collective memory, those who pay for it, produce it, and use it with the intent of instilling trust and a sense of safety... to me this is not anything but ideology. And for me, it is not easy to be convinced by anything other than my own personal experience. I shall always reply: “If you won’t mind, I’ll keep my own individual and liberal personal position, which is the one I trust.” Therefore, collective memory is always an ideology, which in France’s case was administered by Durkheim and Halbwachs. Instead of heading a national church of France, Halbwachs invented a collective memory for the French republic that, close to 1900, gave France an adequate form of self-identification in an almost entirely monarchical Europe, in which France stood as an exception. This is how France was able to sustain its self-identity based on collective memory in the world of monarchies of that time. However, all of this was nothing more than an academic invention, a subject of professors.

**JFF** Which reminds me of Mohan’s definition of the intellectual as a “mythmaker”...

**RK** Max Weber exhibits keen insight in his analysis of the nation as the consequence of the action of intellectuals through language. Weber applied a very sober, professorial perspective to this.

**JFS/JFF** We would like to continue, if you allow us to, with a few questions related to historical memory. Your work on the memory of the world wars have shed plenty of light on the repercussion of these dramatic events on the conscience of Europeans, specially the French and the German. As we celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz do you have the impression that young Germans, the grandsons of those who fought in the war, have finally been able to overcome a past that has for a long time been hanging over their consciences?

**RK** The conscience of the young generation seems clear. They did not participate in the acts, they can freely express their views and interpretations and they can easily say what they want. Among them there is no true conflict and frankly, as to the existence of differences between the French and the Germans, it seems to me that the best disputes are those in which, although positions are different, there is an agreement upon what is being disagreed. This creates a common ground that allows you to deal with the past in equal terms, something more difficult when it comes to the past of Jews since the annihilation was so overwhelming that in this respect there is no space for a free debate, meaning that it will be necessary to wait for people to die before we can have new events and information. Without personal resentment it will be easier. However it is extremely difficult, I have many Jewish friends in the United States and in Israel but it is still a delicate subject. It is hard to keep a free debate because there are certain prejudices that are inevitable and one must learn how to live with them. These differences are similar to those between the Germans and the Polish: Poles and Russians were treated with cruelty. This is why I have tried – but failed – to celebrate the survival of people of Polish and Russian origin. I said “We annihilated six million Jews, three million Poles and much more than six million Russians, and we are forced to acknowledge these unbelievable deaths which took place in the past.” But the Jews always opposed including the Slavs in this narrative because they insist on the singularity of the extermination of the Jews, for it is assumed that Jews



were annihilated all at once because of Hitler's ideology. And that is true... It is very difficult to get into this kind of debate, since prejudice will inevitably contaminate memories. Therefore, as I was saying, the debate is not as uncomplicated as the French-German one. We are aware of the cooperation of many French with the Nazis during the war. We know that the simple consciousness that cooperation existed proves that there is a disposition towards this common debate about the national-socialist (Nazi) past. Perhaps what happens in Spain and its internal problems regarding its *franquista* past has some resemblance to the case I have been discussing. I am sure there are analogies.

**JFS/JFF** Given that, for many reasons, Spain did not participate in the world wars and that the Spanish twentieth century was marked by the bloody Civil War (1936-1939), we believe that the memory of such traumatic experience differs in many ways from that of our European neighbors. Therefore, according to several observers, the success of Spain's transition to democracy following Franco's death can be attributed to a wise management of memory and forgetfulness by those, among *franquistas* and *antifranquistas*, who were able to reconcile and act according to certain minimal rules that consolidated the end of dictatorship and paved the way to a new liberal-democratic regime. At that moment Spaniards were emphasizing that the painful experience of war forced everyone (specially the defeated) to reflect on the circumstances that led to that catastrophe with the intent of learning from this experience in order to avoid its repetition. In the past few years we have been witnessing the appearance of certain revisionist movements that put this model of transition into question and in some cases propose a complete reevaluation of events and facts. Such an attitude is particularly common among those who deem themselves guardians of the memory of the defeated and heirs of Spain's Second Republic. The wave of "memorialism" currently being experienced in Spain – which includes the push to conduct exhumations of common burial grounds in search of corpses of victims along with other initiatives, such as the removal of monuments honoring Franco – is in tune with this revisionist movement. A movement which, at least for a portion of the militant left, indicates a will to avenge, which frequently collides with the much more flexible attitudes of the few survivors and of the families of victims. In fact, at times, it is possible to see the rhetoric of revenge serv-

ing different ends – for example, that of radical Basque nationalists, which is evidently fashioned to downplay the recent memory of the victims of Basque terrorism while bringing to the fore the memory of the Spanish Civil War victims. These discourses do not hesitate in prying open old wounds that are still not entirely healed, even though sixty years have gone by since the Civil War (and thirty years since the death of the dictator). Based on the German experience, which you know well, and although these are different cases, what are the foundations for the construction or mending of a common memory in a country torn by ideological civil war, like Spain?

**RK** The rule I follow in this subject consists of always preserving differences and debating differences without masks. This way everyone has the chance to keep their independence and respect toward others based on mutual recognition. Recognition by and of both sides assumes that there is an upfront predisposition towards peace. But if you deny the independence of others then you are immediately under pressure to suppress them. I believe that insisting on difference is the best way to contribute to peace and to common memory, given that memory is divided. And to accept the latter, that memory is divided, is better than trying to make up a single common memory. It seems to me that this should be the norm, the general rule in this sort of subject. This is a criterion that could apply to all Europe, to Israelis, Poles, Germans, and so on. I think that, by extension, this would apply to the Spanish as well. In my judgment it's the only way.

**JFS/JFF** Could you explain if there is any methodological relationship between your work on monuments and war memorials and the history of concepts. And, if that is the case, what are the common points that could be established between them? What would be the main difference between your approach to the study of these subjects and that proposed by Pierre Nora during the 80s in his famous book *Lieux de Mémoire*? Would you agree with François Hartog's argument, present in his book *Regimes d'Historicité* (2003) suggesting that we are entering an epoch of presentism and memorialism both of which, paradoxically, kill history.

**RK** I know both works pretty well. In general, I agree with Hartog's semi-ironic position. The wave of memorialism is paradoxically pro-

duced by a certain attitude towards history. It's a trend that might be forgotten in 20 years, hopefully. However I will not outlive it. In fact it is based on the assumption that objective history should be replaced by subjective history, if we are to use the traditional meanings of these adjectives. If you insist on memory you are saying that subjective history is much more important than the objective analysis of historians, and that is foolish. There is no doubt about the importance of the subjective dimension, and I am myself in favor of respecting the subjective experience, such as my own, but an analysis of what happens should not solely rely on subjective experience. An authentic analysis of the past requires a theoretical approach that goes beyond subjective experience, of memories of real events that, without a doubt, are rearranged ideologically. Given that Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* refers only to France, the conflicts between France and Germany, and I suppose France and Spain, are all subordinated to what constitutes French identity, which is the subject around which the book is organized. I am sure one can find in the book the assumption that Strasbourg was liberated from German domination by the French, when in reality it was an old medieval German town with a very advanced cultural life, with a prolific literary, religious, and theological production, and which was occupied as a consequence of the Turkish invasion of Austria... but I can assure you that you will not find this version in French books like *Lieux de Mémoire*. The fact is that, in order to interpret the common history of Europe, both points of view are needed and discussion should ensue. It is better to have this dispute and be open to it than to invent a common ideology.

**JFF** What do you think of George Mosse's and Mario Isnenghi's work on the memory of World War I in Italy?

**RK** I do not know Isnenghi, however Mosse I know well because he attended my seminars. His work and my analysis of war memorials, the iconography and the symbolic messages are almost identical. Celebrative monuments in France, Italy, Germany and England provoke very similar emotional identifications. The difference lies only in the helmets and type of uniform worn by the characters represented, but the message is the same. Those who participated in the

European wars had a common symbolical experience. This is exemplified by my argument about the tradition of using engravings of Saint George killing the dragon, which started in Scotland, continued in England and soon reached the Netherlands, Bavaria, Poland, Russia... Saint Geroge always appears killing a dragon which represents the neighboring country, but in this neighboring country the situation would be the same by the roles inverted... This is the best symbol for the aporetic situation the celebration of the absurd wars we have been waging against each other for centuries produces.

The last part of your question is whether there is a precise difference between visualization and rationalization from the point of view of conceptual history. I think both approaches are very similar. If, for example, we look at specific concepts in different languages, which is what happens in the work we were talking about just a while ago, in which this is done to the words related to bourgeoisie and citizenship in French, English, and German, we will notice that there is a plurality of bourgeois and "citizenship" worlds. So, something very similar takes place when we study monuments. On one hand, there are common symbols and words and, on the other, a common way of using these symbols that are monuments. Symbols that differ in their specific articulation but that are similar in their iconic structure. Similarities are frequent. If we examine the inscriptions on monuments we will often find this one: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. Germans, English, Italians, and the French, they have always used the same inscription suggesting how beautiful it is to die for one's country, since that is what everyone says. Erasmus of Rotterdam gives a good response to this assertion when he says that war is only beautiful for those who do not know it (*Dulce est bellum inexpertis*). But those who know it have a very different opinion and I am sure that this opinion based on experience is more common than we imagine.

**JFS** For those who know it, it must be much more bitter...

**RK** Of course. However the bitterness of experiencing war may acquire a sweet taste if one is lucky to survive. This is the only chance we have to reflect upon this experience, otherwise the chance is lost.

## ON THE CURRENT CRISIS OF CONCEPTS AND IN PARTICULAR OF THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY

**JFS/JFF** Thirty years separate us from the publication of the entry *Geschichte/ Historie* in the second volume of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG) in 1975. In this essential text, recently translated into Spanish, you magnificently reconstruct the genesis and evolution of the modern concept of history. However, we have the impression that the social and cultural changes that occurred over the last decades and the crisis of the discipline of history are producing a deep erosion of the concept. This is so evident that we are now asking ourselves if we are not on the verge of large-scale semantic transformation. In short, we have the impression that history, such as it was conceived in eighteenth-century Europe – i.e. as a universal metaconcept which reduces the multitude of human experience to a singular transcendent collectivity – is being challenged by a profusion of particular histories; that the peak of multiculturalism could lead to a new fragmentation of the all-encompassing concept of history. On this topic, it is worthwhile to mention that for Maurice Halbwachs at the beginning of the twentieth century, collective memory was as numerous as the amount of social groups who kept them, while there was only one history. And if our observation is correct, we could say that today history is as multiple and fragmented as memory. Do you think the evolution of the concept of history could lead in that direction, and if it does, could this transformation be interpreted as a return to the concept's previous condition? Moreover, would it be possible that the case with the concept of history is not unique but rather a symptom of a much broader process? Therefore, the criticism coming from the *grands récits* post-modernist authors (e.g. Lyotard) and the disintegration of pillars of modernity such as the concepts of history, liberty/freedom, and progress – that are no longer singular collective names and are returning to their pre-Sattelzeit origin – seems to indicate that, as some would suggest, we are embarking on a journey back to modernity. Are these forecasts exaggerated? Do you think that there is enough evidence supporting the existence of such process?

On the other hand, it is true that, as we were saying, there has always been a gap between factual reality and its linguistic assimilation. Don't you have the impression that this gap has become too wide lately as a consequence of the decay of many political and social concepts that acquired its modern meaning in the last two hundred years, that these concepts have ex-

hausted their capacity to generate expectations and that they are no longer capable of dealing with absorbing the new realities of the early twenty first century? In today's world, with the continuous acceleration of and the anxiety generated by an imminent yet unknown future, the horizon of expectations seems to have been considerably stretched while the field of experience is many times of little use given that it is always made up of a world soon to be rendered old, to a state of permanently changing things.

In a similar way, could it be said that the balance between experience and expectation has been disturbed insofar as the opaque and unpredictable nature of the future – it has become progressively harder to see the future as an extension of the present – complicates predictions based on past events? If we accept this decline of our conceptual universe and the implosion of political and social concepts, don't you think that we could be at the threshold of another *Sattelzeit*, the great semantic transformation that took shape after the second half of the eighteenth century? However this would be a reverse *Sattelzeit*, a sort of *Sattelzeit* turned upside down? In this case, given what we know about the first conceptual revolution in the modern world, would it be worth to take up a sort of "prospective history," a history of the concepts of the present time? And, as a conclusion, would Cicero's aphorism "*Historia magistra vitae*" still be valid?

**RK** First of all, concerning *Sattelzeit*, I have to tell you that I invented the term and used it for the first time in commercial advertisements created to promote the GG – to sell more issues. Although I am happy that succeeded in providing the lexicon with some money, I do not particularly like the term, mainly because it is very ambiguous. As you know, one of the meanings of *Sattel* refers to horses, to the equestrian world, and another refers to the situation experienced when one climbs to the top of a mountain and from there can contemplate a larger view. But in the end it does not allude in any specific way to the acceleration of time, which is the crucial aspect of the experience in the modern world. Therefore, from a theoretical point of view, *Sattelzeit* is a very deficient term. But in the end it is not so bad. If what we are looking for are the imprints of the experience of historical change on linguistic expression it is also possible to identify a *Sattelzeit* in France. As noted by Paul Hazard, toward the end of the seventeenth century, after Louis XIV's reign, the

Enlightenment produced several linguistic innovations. This process of radical change started in France at the beginning of the seventeenth century, before anything similar occurred in Germany. And the *Sattelzeit* of the Italians could have started with the great conceptual innovation introduced by Machiavelli.

**JFS** Probably in the Spanish case too, the sixteenth and seventeenth century could have been important in the renovation of political language, although it was a renovation built upon tradition (neo-scholasticism). But, on the other hand, there is no doubt that the period equivalent to the German *Sattelzeit* – from the second half of the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century – was also decisive in the modernization of the Spanish political lexicon.

**RK** Nevertheless, all these periods or thresholds of conceptual change do not have the theoretical implications of the *Sattelzeit* we discussed years ago. The most important feature of that transition was that it opened a wide gap between the experiences and expectations of the people of that time. Machiavelli of course also produced a rupture in the field of political science which, in one way or another, would affect everyone in the immediate future. However, Machiavelli systematically drew upon history as a source of lessons for the future. With the *Sattelzeit*, historical argument loses its power of persuasion because explanations based on the past do not seem to quite fit into what is happening during periods of rapid historical acceleration in which changes are produced at a progressively faster pace. Therefore it is no longer possible to immediately apply past experience to these new events and the future becomes even more unpredictable.

However, in the long run it is evident that the structures of acceleration themselves can be studied and lead to the discovery of common or similar problems as those from the nineteenth and twentieth century. If we analyze the structure of historical acceleration we will find many temporal layers that correspond to distinct experiences. This is essentially my theory and my answer in response to the crisis of the *historia magistra vitae* topic.

**JFS** Your reflections on the transformation of the concept of history in modern times and specially on the establishment of the macroconcept of history as a “collective singular” (*Kollektivsingular*) -- which is the convergence point of all individual narratives and is capable of encompassing the totality of histories and projecting them onto a larger shared scenario for human action through the course of centuries -- suggests that nowadays, as a consequence of multiculturalism, many voices have been presented, specially within the United States, that claim rights for collective groups – women, African Americans, Hispanics, etc. – to write their own histories. This makes me wonder if one of the consequences of post-modernity is not the rupture of the global and universalistic concept of History that was produced during the end of the eighteenth century as an all-encompassing concept regulating processes and experiences past, present and future. Now, as the twenty first century begins, are we witnessing a Big Bang of history? Is history no longer a “collective singular”? Is it fragmenting once again into a multitude of specific histories?

**RK** I think that globalization is part of the modern experience, as are individualization, the proliferation of different tribes and peoples, and the appearance of small units of action (the recent conflicts in the Balkans are an example of this). On the other hand, the grounds for pluralization today are common and universal and in this sense globalization is not an ideological invention but a consequence of the economic expansion of larger and more powerful nations. Furthermore, within these large economies, which happen to be based on older and more consolidated societies, new differences show up. Nevertheless I think that this pluralization of histories you are alluding to proves the need of a collective singular “history” as an analytical tool.

**JFS** However, it seems certain that the grand political rhetoric of those who spoke of History with a capital “H” has fallen out of use – here I am thinking of Fidel Castro’s statement that “History will acquit me” or Franco’s wish only to be accountable to “God and History.”

**RK** You are referring to the intentions of certain people, politicians in trouble, reacting to pressure and widespread criticism trying to buy themselves time by saying that they should be judged only



by what happens in the future in a gesture of self-affirmation and justification... It is true that the use of such rhetoric is falling out of use and I think it is a good thing that this conception of history as ultimate universal justice has practically disappeared. But this does not mean that history as a form of totality has been wiped out: quite the contrary, analytically speaking, I still find it very useful to study global changes at a universal scale.

**JFF** It could be said that globalization at the same time destroys old identities and creates new ones...

**RK** Certainly, and right now it is still hard to determine what guides this process...

**JFS/JFF** Finally we would like to act as intermediaries for two colleagues who collaborate with us in the Ibero-american conceptual history project (Iberconceptos): Noemí Goldman (NG), from the Instituto Ravignani, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina and João Feres Júnior (JFJ), from the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro – IUPERJ, Brazil.

**NG** In your reflection on “the empirical connection between reality and discourse,” where and how does it locate the historian’s task of interpreting/describing in relation to the conceptual resources available to the subjects of history? In other words, what is the relationship between the present (the historian) and the past (the discursive action of actors) in the process of historical comprehension, keeping in mind that the historian must talk (write) in two different “languages” at the same time and that one must be conscious of this fact?

**RK** I don’t think that this dual reality should be overestimated. It is something rather normal since naturally everyone speaks his or her own language. And if we interpret languages from the past only in terms of singular differences, unique cases, in reality this will simply constitute our own particular approach to things, which is what leads us to thinking that we have the advantage of speaking the old languages of the past. This question is not a problem for Gadamer, who would say that “prejudice” is necessary in order to understand anything. He thought that such “prejudices”, which are the result of anyone’s insertion within a tradition, were requisites for the com-

prehension and for that matter were also essential in order to understand languages of the past, or, more precisely, what is supposed to be the messages of this language from the past. And to Gadamer the dialectic relationship between “prejudices” of the present and the original meanings of the past entails transformation: a translation from past to present, two realms that cannot be drastically separated given that the relationship between them depends on differences that are the foundation of any analysis of the past. It is impossible to confront and read texts from the past unless we pose these questions. What I want to say is that we always need a hypothesis - in order to get answers there must be questions. Answers don't just come about uninvited and unmotivated and we are naturally the ones who make the questions that need to be answered – it is inevitable. It is not a privilege – it is inescapable.

**JFJ** In your critique of Gadamer's radical defense of *Sprachlichkeit* you repeatedly refer to the extra-linguistic aspects of the human condition. If I understood this correctly your stance concerning the relationship between conceptual history and language is that of proximity but not complete overlapping. Despite the overwhelming reception of the linguistic turn you are not the only one who resists total adherence. In his writings on recognition (*Anerkennung*), the philosopher Axel Honneth has suggested a similar argument referring to the appearance of social demands in the public sphere. He argues that, by itself, human suffering is not capable of generating an articulated public discourse that could then be shared by a group of people committed to/involved in public debate. If this is true, many questions arise on the relationship between conceptual history and social history. Let us leave aside the study of what remains “unsaid,” of the elements that are repressed in the flow of human communication, and let us examine issues that directly affect conceptual history. If, on one hand, basic concepts (*Grundbegriffen*) represent a part of social experience that makes its way into the public sphere and, on the other, there are crucial aspects of social experience in all societies that never achieve publicity, can this experience be considered less important than those expressed by the basic concepts? Would “the political” also be part of this experience? How could conceptual history handle these aspects of social experience? Shouldn't conceptual history be concerned with the study of administrative, cultural, and technical concepts, as well as of counter- con-

cepts, just to name a few categories? In short why do conceptual historians focus so much on basic concepts while other categories get little attention?

**RK** Well... my conception of basic concepts does not exclude negative experiences that have been silenced. My critique of Gadamer from the methodological point of view is precisely centered on his idea of language (*Sprache*) as the only and exclusive source of all experience. I think that it's the other way around. Experience goes much beyond its linguistic interpretation, but certainly for those who believe that everything can be reduced to language, concentrating exclusively on the study of basic concepts can provoke the silencing of other experiences. This approach could limit the social implications that can be discovered by studying basic concepts and also the things that remain silenced due to them. Asymmetrical counter-concepts (*asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffe*), on which I wrote an essay a while ago, also have a lot to do with the art of silencing things. They are means of attributing things to other people, to those who do not belong to our group, through a binary conceptualization heavily unilateral and derogatory that reduces them to a purely negative semantic field. Something similar occurs with the monuments to the dead – they show and silence at the same time. Any memorial of this kind shows something but silences the rest – and this goes for all monuments. Those that celebrate the winners hide the losers, and those that serve as remembrance for the vanquished forget the victors. This poses, of course, a moral question. The relationship between silence and manifestation in language and/or in symbols brings up the perennial problem of the need to inquire into political concepts that are silenced, which, according to this logic, would not be considered basic concepts. Therefore I see no problem in dealing with this the same way Walter Benjamin did. He used to say that we should also celebrate those who have been defeated and that we should invite people to see things from their point of view. So, why not? There is no reason conceptual history should not also be obliged to celebrate those excluded. This is implicit methodologically as you study the two sides of asymmetrical counter concepts. What is the difference between Greeks and Barbarians, Christians and heretics, human beings and un-human beings? (given that classifying other human be-

ings as un-human would be the most extreme form of asymmetrical conceptualization).

**JFS** João Feres Júnior has done some very good work on the history of the concept of Spanish America and then, later, on that of Latin America in the United States as well as on the negative stereotypes linked to both concepts used as asymmetrical counter concepts...

**RK** Yes, I remember reading it, João sent me his work himself. It is very interesting. It points out silence as a practice that hides behind ordinary language. Yes, very interesting. But, as I said, language is always ambiguous. It is at the same time receptive and productive. On one hand it indicates social change and on the other it is an essential factor that allows us to become conscious of changes in reality. Gadamer did not accept this ambiguity in language. For him, following Heidegger's footsteps, language implicitly contains the totality of experience. There is no doubt that in the process of transferring many concepts from Greek into German philosophy, Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy transformed language into the key to all human reality. There is a very strong argument to backing up this position, but for me, as a historian, it is impossible to accept it as a unique and exclusive truth. As a historian I cannot limit myself to the linguistic domain, that is, to what was in fact said, I must also occupy myself with that which could be said.

**ENDNOTES**

<sup>1</sup>This interview was conducted in Madrid, on April 5, 2005, during Koselleck's first professional visit to Spain. It first appeared in Spanish in *Revista de Libros*, nº 111, March 2006, pp. 19-22 and nº 112, April 2006, pp. 6-10. Contributions to the History of Concepts would like to thank Javier Fernández Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes for authorizing its publication here.

<sup>2</sup>Koselleck here refers to his conference "Wiederholungsstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte", given the day after this interview, on April 6, 2005, at the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales de Madrid. This lecture will appear, in Spanish translation, on *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, no. 134, December 2006.

