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## Begriffsgeschichte and Social History

According to a well-known saying of Epictetus, it is not deeds that shock humanity, but the words describing them.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Stoic point that one should not allow oneself to be disturbed by words, the contrast between “pragmata” and “dogmata” has aspects other than those indicated by Epictetus’s moral dictum. It draws our attention to the autonomous power of words without the use of which human actions and passions could hardly be experienced, and certainly not made intelligible to others. This epigram stands in a long tradition concerned with the relation of word and thing, of the spiritual and the lived, of consciousness and being, of language and the world. Whoever takes up the relation of *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history is subject to the reverberations of this tradition. The domain of theoretical principles is quickly broached, and it is these principles which will here be subjected to an investigation from the point of view of current research.<sup>2</sup>

The association of *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history appears at first sight to be loose, or at least difficult. For a *Begriffsgeschichte* concerns itself (primarily) with texts and words, while a social history employs texts merely as a means of deducing circumstances and movements that are not, in themselves, contained within the texts. Thus, for example, when social history investigates social formations or the construction of constitutional forms—the relations of groups, strata, and classes—it goes beyond the immediate context of action in seeking medium- or long-term structures and their change. Or it might introduce economic theorems for the purpose of scrutinizing individual

events and the course of political action. Texts and their attributed conditions of emergence here possess only a referential nature. The methods of *Begriffsgeschichte*, in contrast, derive from the sphere of a philosophical history of terminology, historical philology, semasiology, and onomatology; the results of its work can be evaluated continually through the exegesis of texts, while at the same time, they are based on such exegesis.

This initial contrast is superficially quite striking. Once engaged methodologically, however, it becomes apparent that the relation of *Begriffsgeschichte* and social history is more complex than would be the case if the former discipline could in fact be reduced to the latter. This is immediately apparent when considering the domain of objects which the respective disciplines study. Without common concepts there is no society, and above all, no political field of action. Conversely, our concepts are founded in politicosocial systems that are far more complex than would be indicated by treating them simply as linguistic communities organized around specific key concepts. A “society” and its “concepts” exist in a relation of tension which is also characteristic of its academic historical disciplines.

An attempt will be made to clarify the relation of both disciplines at three levels:

1. To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* follows a classical critical-historical method, but by virtue of its greater acuity, also contributes to the tangibility of sociohistorical themes. Here, the analysis of concepts is in a subsidiary relation to social history.
2. To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* represents an independent discipline with its own method, whose content and range are to be defined parallel to social history, while both disciplines, at the same time, mutually overlap.
3. To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* poses a genuine historical claim without whose solution an effective social history cannot be practiced.

There are two limitations on the following considerations: first, they do not deal with linguistic history, even as a part of social history, but rather with the sociopolitical terminology relevant to the current condition of social history. Second, within this terminology and its numerous expressions, emphasis will be placed on concepts whose semantic “carrying capacity” extends further than the “mere” words employed in the sociopolitical domain.<sup>3</sup>

### The Method of *Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History

So that the critical-historical implications of *Begriffsgeschichte* might here be demonstrated to be a necessary aid to social history, it is most convenient to begin with an example. It comes from the time of the French, and of the emergent industrial, revolutions; hence, from a zone that was to prove decisive for the development both of sociology and of sociohistorical questions.

Hardenberg, in his well-known September Memorandum of the year 1807, drew up guidelines for the reorganization of the Prussian state. The entire state was to be socially and economically restructured according to the experiences of the French Revolution. Hardenberg wrote:

A rational system of ranks, not favoring one *Stand* over another, but rather providing the citizens of all *Stände* with their places alongside each other according to specific classes, must belong to the true needs of a state, and not at all to its immaterial needs.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand what is, for Hardenberg's future reform policy, a programmatic statement, an exegesis is required which, through a critique of the sources, can unlock the specific concepts which the policy contains. The transfer of the traditional differentiation between "true" and "immaterial" from the *Stände* to the state was a conception current for just half a century and will not be examined here. What is initially striking, however, is that Hardenberg opposes the vertical ranking of the *Stände* with a horizontal articulation of classes. The *Standesordnung* is evaluated pejoratively insofar as it implies the favoring of one *Stand* over another, while all members of these *Stände* are, at the same time, citizens and as such should be equal. In this statement they do, as citizens, remain members of a *Stand*; but their functions are defined "according to specific classes," and it is in this way that a rational system of ranks should arise.

Such a statement, liberally sprinkled as it is with politico-social expressions, involves, on the purely linguistic level, not inconsiderable difficulties, even if the political point, exactly on account of its semantic ambiguity, is clear. The established society of orders is to be replaced by a society of citizens (formally endowed with equal rights), whose membership in classes (yet to be defined politically and economically) should make possible a new, state-based system of ranks.

It is clear that the exact sense can be obtained only by reference to the complete Memorandum; but it is also necessary to take into account the situation of the author and the addressee. Due regard also must be paid to the political situation and the social condition of contemporary Prussia; just as, finally, the use of language by the author, his contemporaries, and the generation preceding him, with whom he shared a specific linguistic community, must be considered. All of these questions belong to the usual critical-historical, and in particular historical-philological, method, even if problems arise that are not soluble by this method alone. In particular, this concerns the social structure of contemporary Prussia, which cannot be adequately comprehended without an economic, political, or sociological framework for investigation.

Specific restriction of our investigation to the concepts actually employed in such a statement proves decisive in helping us pose and answer the sociohistorical questions that lie beyond the comprehension of such a statement. If we pass from the sense of the sentence itself to the historical arrangement of the concepts used, such as *Stand*, "class," or "citizen," the diversity of the levels of contemporary experience entering this statement soon becomes apparent.

When Hardenberg talks of citizens (*Staatsbürger*), he is using a technical term that had just been minted, that is not to be found in the Prussian Civil Code, and that registered a polemical engagement with the old society of orders. Thus, it is a concept that is consciously deployed as a weapon in the struggle against the legal inequalities of the *Stände*, at a time when a set of civil rights which could have endowed the Prussian citizen with political rights did not exist. The expression was novel, pregnant with the future; it referred to a constitutional model yet to be realized. At the same time, at the turn of the century, the concept of *Stand* had an endless number of shades of meaning—political, economic, legal, and social—such that no unambiguous association can be derived from the word itself. Insofar as Hardenberg thought of *Stand* and privilege as the same thing, he critically undermined the traditional rights of domination and rule of the upper *Stände*, while in this context, the counterconcept was "class." At this time, the concept "class" possessed a similar variety of meanings, which overlapped here and there with those of *Stand*. Nevertheless, it can be said for the language in use among the German, and especially the Prussian, bureaucracies, that a class at that time was defined more

in terms of economic and legal-administrative criteria than in terms of political status or birth. In this connection, for instance, the physiocratic tradition must be taken into account, a tradition within which the old *Stände* were first redefined according to economic criteria: a design which Hardenberg shared in its liberal economic intention. The use of “class” demonstrates that here a social model which points to the future is set in play, while the concept of *Stand* is related to a centuries-old tradition: it was once again given legal expression in the Civil Code, but the Code’s ambivalence was already increasingly apparent and in need of reform.

Surveying the space of meaning of each of the central concepts employed here exposes, therefore, a contemporary polemical thrust; intentions with respect to the future; and enduring elements of past social organization, whose specific arrangement discloses a statement’s meaning. The activity of temporal semantic construal simultaneously establishes the historical force contained within a statement.

Within the practice of textual exegesis, specific study of the use of politicosocial concepts and the investigation of their meaning thus assumes a sociohistorical status. The moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces. Expressed more generally, social conditions and their transformation become in this fashion the objects of analysis.

A question equally relevant to *Begriffsgeschichte* and social history concerns the time from which concepts can be used as indicators of politico-social change and historical profundity as rigorously as is the case with our example. It can be shown for German-speaking areas from 1770 onward that both new meanings for old words and neologisms proliferate, altering with the linguistic arsenal of the entire political and social space of experience, and establishing new horizons of expectation. This is stimulating enough without posing the question of priority in this process of change between the “material” and the “conceptual.” The struggle over the “correct” concepts becomes socially and politically explosive.

Our author, Hardenberg, likewise sets great store by conceptual distinctions, insisting on linguistic rules which have, since the French Revolution, belonged to the everyday business of politicians. Thus he addressed noble estate owners in assemblies, as well as in writing, as “estate owners” (*Gutsbesitzer*), while he did not forbear from receiving

representatives of regional *Kreisstände* quite properly as *ständische* deputies. “By confusing the names, the concepts also fall into disorder,” Hardenberg’s opponent, Marwitz, stated irritably, “and as a result the old Brandenburg Constitution is placed in mortal danger.” While correct in his conclusion, Marwitz deliberately overlooked the fact that Hardenberg was using new concepts and hence initiating a struggle over the naming of the new form of social organization, a struggle which drags on through the following years in all written communication between the old *Stände* and the bureaucracy. Marwitz certainly recognized that what was at stake in this naming of *ständisch* organization was the title of right that he sought to defend. He therefore disavowed a mission of his fellow *Stand* members to the chancellor because they had announced themselves as “inhabitants” of the *Mark* Brandenburg. They could do that, he suggested, as long as the question concerned “the economic. If the issue, on the other hand, concerns our rights, then this single word—inhabitant—destroys the point of the mission.”<sup>5</sup> In this fashion, Marwitz refused to follow any further the course toward which, on economic grounds, other members of his *Stand* were then inclined. They sought to exchange their political privileges for economic advantage.<sup>6</sup>

The semantic struggle for the definition of political or social position, and defending or occupying these positions by means of such a definition, is conflict which belongs quite certainly to all times of crisis that we can register in written sources. Since the French Revolution, this struggle has become sharper and has altered structurally; concepts no longer merely serve to define given states of affairs, they reach into the future. Increasingly, concepts of the future were created; positions that were to be captured had first to be formulated linguistically before it was possible to even enter or permanently occupy them. The substance of many concepts was thus reduced in terms of actual experience and their aspirations to realization proportionally increased. Actual, substantial experience and the space of expectation coincide less and less. It is in this tendency that the coining of numerous “isms” belongs, serving as concepts for assembly and movement of newly ordered and mobilized masses, stripped of the organizational framework of the *Stände*. The breadth of usage of such expressions reached, as today, from slogan to scientifically defined concept. One needs only to think of “conservatism,” “liberalism,” or “socialism.”

Ever since society has been swept into industrial movement, the political semantic of its related concepts has provided a means of comprehension in the absence of which, today, the phenomena of the past cannot be perceived. It is necessary only to think of the shifts in meaning and the function of the concept "revolution," which at first offered a model formula for the probable recurrence of events; was then reminted as a concept of historicophilosophical objective and political action; and is for us today an indicator of structural change. Here, *Begriffsgeschichte* becomes an integral part of social history.

From this, a methodologically minimal claim follows: namely, that social and political conflicts of the past must be interpreted and opened up via the medium of their contemporary conceptual limits and in terms of the mutually understood, past linguistic usage of the participating agents.

Thus the conceptual clarification of the terms introduced here by way of example, such as *Stand*, class, estate owner, owner, the economic, inhabitant, and citizen, serve as a prerequisite for interpreting the conflict between the Prussian reform group and the Prussian Junkers. The fact that the parties involved overlapped personally and socially makes it all the more necessary to semantically clarify the political and social fronts within this stratum, so that we are able to seize upon hidden interests and intentions.

*Begriffsgeschichte*, therefore, is initially a specialized method for source criticism, taking note as it does of the utilization of terminology relevant to social and political elements and directing itself in particular to the analysis of central expressions having social or political content. It goes without saying that historical clarification of past conceptual usage must refer not only to the history of language but also to sociohistorical data, for every semantic has, as such, an involvement with nonlinguistic contents. It is this that creates its precarious marginality for the linguistic sciences' and is, at the same time, the origin of its great advantages for the historical sciences. The condensation effected by the work of conceptual explanation renders past statements precise, bringing more clearly into view the contemporary intentional circumstances or relations in their form.

### **The Discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History**

Up to this point the emphasis has been laid on source criticism in the specification of concepts as an aid in formulating sociohistorical ques-

tions: *Begriffsgeschichte* is, however, capable of doing more than this would indicate. More precisely, its methodology lays claim to an autonomous sphere which exists in a relation of mutually engendered tension with social history. From the historiographic point of view, specialization in *Begriffsgeschichte* had no little influence on the posing of questions within social history. First, it began as a critique of a careless transfer to the past of modern, context-determined expressions of constitutional argument,<sup>8</sup> and second, it directed itself to criticizing the practice in the history of ideas of treating ideas as constants, articulated in differing historical figures but of themselves fundamentally unchanging. Both elements prompted a greater precision in method, such that in the history of a concept it became possible to survey the contemporary space of experience and horizon of expectation, and to investigate the political and social functions of concepts, together with their specific modality of usage, such that (in brief) a synchronic analysis also took account of the situation and conjuncture.

Such a procedure is enjoined to translate words of the past and their meanings into our present understanding. Each history of word or concept leads from a determination of past meanings to a specification of these meanings for us. Insofar as this procedure is reflected in the method of *Begriffsgeschichte*, the synchronic analysis of the past is supplemented diachronically. It is a methodological precept of diachrony that it scientifically defines anew the registration of the past meanings of words.

Over time, this methodological perspective consistently and substantially transforms itself into a history of the particular concept in question. Insofar as concepts, during this second phase of investigation, are detached from their situational context, and their meanings ordered according to the sequence of time and then ordered with respect to each other, the individual historical analyses of concepts assemble themselves into a history of the concept. Only at this level is historical-philological method superseded, and only here does *Begriffsgeschichte* shed its subordinate relation to social history.

Nevertheless, the sociohistorical payoff is increased. Precisely because attention is directed in a rigorously diachronic manner to the persistence or change of a concept does the sociohistorical relevance of the results increase. To what extent has the intentional substance of one and the same word remained the same? Has it changed with the passage of time, a historical transformation having reconstructed the sense of the



concept? The persistence and validity of a social or political concept and its corresponding structure can only be appreciated diachronically. Words that have remained in constant use are not in themselves a sufficient indication of the stability of their substantial meaning. Thus, the standard term *Bürger* is devoid of meaning without an investigation of the conceptual change undergone by the expression “Bürger”: from (*Stadt-*)*Bürger* (burgher) around 1700 via (*Staats-*)*Bürger* (citizen) around 1800 to *Bürger* (bourgeois) as a nonproletarian around 1900, to cite as an example only a very crude framework.

*Stadtbürger* was a concept appropriate to the *Stände*, in which legal, political, economic, and social definitions were indifferently united—definitions which, with other contents, made up the remaining concepts of the *Stand*.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the *Stadtbürger* was no longer defined in the *Allgemeines Landrecht* (Prussian Civil Code) in terms of a listing of positive criteria (as in the draft), but negatively, as belonging neither to the peasant or noble *Stand*. In this fashion, a claim was registered in a negative manner for a higher generality, which was then conceptualized as *Staatsbürger*. The negation of the negation was accordingly achieved as, in 1848, the *Staatsbürger* assumed positively determined rights which had previously been enjoyed only by “inhabitants” and shareholders of a free economic society. Against the background of the formal legal equality of a liberal economic society underwritten by the state, it was then possible to assign this *Bürger*, in a purely economic fashion, to a class according to which political or social functions were only subsequently derived. This generalization is true both for systems of voting by class and for Marx’s theory.

It is the diachronic disposition of elements which discloses long-term structural changes. This is, for instance, characteristic of the creeping transformation of the meaning of *societas civilis*, or politically constituted society, to *bürgerliche Gesellschaft sine imperio*, which can finally be conceived as an entity separate from the state; this is a piece of knowledge relevant to social history, which can only be gained at the level of the reflections engendered by *Begriffsgeschichte*.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the diachronic principle constitutes *Begriffsgeschichte* as an autonomous domain of research, which methodologically, in its reflection on concepts and their change, must initially disregard their extralinguistic content—the specific sphere of social history. Persistence,

change, or novelty in the meaning of words must first be grasped before they can be used as indices of this extralinguistic content, as indicators of social structures or situations of political conflict.

Considered from a temporal aspect, social and political concepts can be arranged into three groups. First are such traditional concepts as those of Aristotelian constitutional thought, whose meanings have persisted in part and which, even under modern conditions, retain an empirical validity. Second are concepts whose content has changed so radically that, despite the existence of the same word as a shell, the meanings are barely comparable and can be recovered only historically. The variety of meanings attached today to the term *Geschichte*, which appears to be simultaneously its own subject and object, comes to mind, in contrast with the *Geschichten* and *Historien*, which deal with concrete realms of objects and persons; one could also cite “class” as distinct from the Roman *classis*. Third are recurrently emerging neologisms reacting to specific social or political circumstances that attempt to register or even provoke the novelty of such circumstances. Here, “communism” and “fascism” can be invoked.

Within this temporal scheme there are, of course, endless transitions and superimpositions. The history of the concept “democracy” can, for example, be considered under all three aspects. First, ancient democracy as a constantly given, potential constitutional form of the Polis: here are definitions, procedures, and regularities that can still be found in democracies today. The concept was modernized in the eighteenth century to characterize new organizational forms typical of the large modern state and its social consequences. Invocation of the rule of law and the principle of equality took up and modified old meanings. With respect to the social transformations following the industrial revolution, however, the concept assumed new valencies: it became a concept characterizing a state of expectation which, within a historicphilosophical perspective—be it legislative or revolutionary—claimed to satisfy newly constituted needs so that its meaning might be validated. Finally, “democracy” became a general concept replacing “republic” (*politeia*), that consigned to illegality all other constitutional types as forms of rule. This global universality, usable for a variety of distinct political tendencies, made it necessary to refurbish the concept by adding qualifying expressions. It was only in this manner that it could retain any functional effectivity: hence arise representative, Christian, social, and people’s democracies, and so forth.

Persistence, change, and novelty are thus conceived diachronically along the dimension of meanings and through the spoken form of one and the same word. Temporally testing a possible *Begriffsgeschichte* according to persistence, change, and novelty leads to the disposition of persisting, overlapping, discarded, and new meanings which can only become relevant for a social history if the history of the concept has been subject to a prior and separate analysis. As an independent discipline, therefore, *Begriffsgeschichte* delivers indicators for social history by pursuing its own methods.

This restriction of analysis to concepts has to be elaborated further, so that the autonomy of the method can be protected from a hasty identification with sociohistorical questions related to extralinguistic content. Naturally, a linguistic history can be outlined which can itself be conceived as social history. A *Begriffsgeschichte* is more rigorously bounded. The methodological limitation to the history of concepts expressed in words must have a basis that renders the expressions “concept” and “word” distinguishable. In whatever way the linguistic triad of word (signification)—meaning (concept)—object is employed in its different variants, a straightforward distinction—initially pragmatic—can be made in the sphere of historical science: sociopolitical terminology in the source language possesses a series of expressions that, on the basis of critical exegesis, stand out definitively as concepts. Each concept is associated with a word, but not every word is a social and political concept. Social and political concepts possess a substantial claim to generality and always have many meanings—in historical science, occasionally in modalities other than words.

Thus it is possible to articulate or linguistically create a group identity through the emphatic use of the word “we,” while such a procedure only becomes conceptually intelligible when the “we” is associated with collective terms such as “nation,” “class,” “friendship,” “church,” and so on. The general utility of the term “we” is substantiated through these expressions but on a level of conceptual generality.

The stamping of a word as a concept might occur without noticeable disturbance, depending on the linguistic use of the sources. This is primarily because of the ambiguity of all words, a property shared by concepts as words. Their common historical quality is based on this. This ambiguity can be read in diverse ways, according to whether a word can be taken as a concept or not. Intellectual or material meanings are indeed bound to the word, but they feed off the intended

content, the written or spoken context, and the historical situation. This is equally true for both word and concept. In use, however, a word can become unambiguous. In contrast, a concept must remain ambiguous in order to be a concept. The concept is bound to a word, but is at the same time more than a word: a word becomes a concept when the plenitude of a politicosocial context of meaning and experience in and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word.

Consider the variety of objects that enter the word "state" so that it may become a concept: domination, domain, bourgeoisie, legislation, jurisdiction, administration, taxation, and army, to invoke only present-day terms. A variety of circumstances with their own terminology (and conceptuality) are taken up by the word "state" and made into a common concept. Concepts are thus the concentrate of several substantial meanings. The signification of a word can be thought separately from that which is signified. Signifier and signified coincide in the concept insofar as the diversity of historical reality and historical experience enter a word such that they can only receive their meaning in this one word, or can only be grasped by this word. A word presents potentialities for meaning; a concept unites within itself a plenitude of meaning. Hence, a concept can possess clarity but must be ambiguous. "All concepts escape definition that summarize semiotically an entire process; only that which has no history is definable" (Nietzsche). A concept binds a variety of historical experience and a collection of theoretical and practical references into a relation that is, as such, only given and actually ascertainable through the concept.

It becomes plain here that, while concepts have political and social capacities, their semantic function and performance is not uniquely derivative of the social and political circumstances to which they relate. A concept is not simply indicative of the relations which it covers; it is also a factor within them. Each concept establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets a limit. The history of concepts is therefore able to provide knowledge which is not obtainable from empirical study (*Sachanalyse*). The language of concepts is a consistent medium in which experiential capacity and theoretical stability can be assessed. This can, of course, be done sociohistorically, but sight must not be lost of the method of *Begriffsgeschichte*.

Naturally, the autonomy of the discipline must not be allowed to lead to a diminution of actual historical materiality simply because the latter is excluded for a specific section of the investigation. On the contrary, this materiality is itself given voice by withdrawing the analytical frame from the linguistic constitution of political situations or social structures. As a historical discipline, *Begriffsgeschichte* is always concerned with political or social events and circumstances, although indeed, only with those which have been conceptually constituted and articulated in the source language. In a restricted sense it interprets history through its prevailing concepts, even if the words are used today, while in turn treating these concepts historically, even if their earlier usage must be defined anew for us today. If we were to formulate this in a somewhat exaggerated fashion, we could say that *Begriffsgeschichte* deals with the convergence of concept and history. History would then simply be that which had already been conceptualized as such. Epistemologically, this would imply that nothing can occur historically that is not apprehended conceptually. But apart from this overvaluation of written sources, which is neither theoretically nor historically sustainable, there lurks behind this theory of convergence the danger of an ontological misunderstanding of *Begriffsgeschichte*. This would result in the sociohistorical dissipation of the critical impulse toward the revision of the history of ideas or of intellectual history, and along with this, the potential critique of ideologies that *Begriffsgeschichte* can initiate.

Moreover, the method of *Begriffsgeschichte* breaks out of the naive circular movement from word to thing and back. It would be a theoretically irredeemable short circuit if history were to be constructed out of its own concepts, establishing a kind of identity between linguistically articulated *Zeitgeist* and the conjunction of events. Rather, there exists between concept and materiality a tension which now is transcended, now breaks out afresh, now appears insoluble. Between linguistic usage and the social materialities upon which it encroaches or to which it targets itself, there can always be registered a certain hiatus. The transformation of the meaning of words and the transformation of things, the change of situation and the urge to rename, correspond diversely with each other.

Methodological complications follow from this. The investigation of a concept cannot be carried out purely semasiologically; it can never limit itself to the meanings of words and their changes. *A Begriffsgeschichte*

must always keep in view the need for findings relevant to intellectual or material history. Above all, the semasiological approach must alternate with the onomasiological; i.e., *Begriffsgeschichte* must register the variety of names for (identical?) materialities in order to be able to show how concepts are formed. So, for instance, the phenomenon of *Säkularisation* cannot be investigated solely on the basis of the expression itself.<sup>10</sup> For the historical treatment of words, parallel expressions like *Verweltlichung* (secularization) and *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization) must be introduced; the domain of church and constitutional law must be taken into account historically; and in terms of intellectual history, the ideological currents which crystallized around the expression must be examined—all before the concept *Säkularisation* is sufficiently worked up as a factor in and indicator of the history to which it relates.

To take another phenomenon, the federal structure of the old *Reich* belongs to long-term political and legal facticities which have, from the late Middle Ages down to the Federal Republic of today, laid down a specific framework of political potential and political action. The history of the word *Bund* by itself, however, is not adequate to clarify federal structure in the historical process. We can sketch this very roughly here. Formed in the thirteenth century, the term *Bund* was a relatively late creation of German jurisprudence. *Bundesabmachungen* (*Einungen*), insofar as they could not be subsumed under such Latin expressions as *foedus*, *unio*, *liga*, and *societas*, initially could only be employed orally in this legal language. At first, it was the aggregation of completed and named *Verbündnisse* that brought about the condensation into the institutional expression *Bund*. Then, with the increasing experience of *Bünde*, linguistic generalization was possible, which then became available as the concept *Bund*. From then on, it was possible to reflect conceptually on the relation of a *Bund* to the *Reich* and on the constitution of the *Reich* in the form of a *Bund*. But this possibility was barely made use of in the final decades of the Middle Ages. The concept's center of gravity remained associated with estate rights; in particular, designating *Städtebünde* (town unions), as opposed to *fürstlichen Einungen* (unions constituted of the rulers of principalities) or *ritterschaftlichen Gesellschaften* (societies of knights). The religious loading of the concept *Bund* in the Reformation era resulted—in contrast with the Calvinist world—in its political corrosion. As far as Luther was concerned, only God was capable of creating a *Bund*,

and it was for this reason that the Schmalkand *Vorstand* never characterized itself as a *Bund*. It only became referred to as such historiographically at a much later time. Simultaneous and emphatic use of the term, in a religious as well as a political sense, by Müntzer and peasants in 1525 led to discrimination against usage in the form of a taboo. It thus went into retreat as a technical term of constitutional law, and the confessional forces assembled themselves under expressions which were initially interchangeable and neutral, such as *Liga* and *Union*. In the bloody disputes that followed, these expressions hardened into religious battle cries which in turn became notorious in the course of the Thirty Years War. From 1648 on, French terms like *Allianz* permeated the constitutional law of the states in the empire. Penetrated by terminology drawn from the Law of Nations, it was covertly subject to alteration. It was only with the dissolution of the old imperial *Standesordnung* that the expression *Bund* reemerged, and this time it did so at the levels of society, state, and law, simultaneously. The social expression *bündisch* was coined (by Campe); the legal distinction of *Bündnis* and *Bund*—equivalent in meaning earlier—could now be articulated; and ultimately, with the end of the *Reich*, the term *Bundestaat* was discovered, which first brought the formerly insoluble constitutional aporia into a historical concept oriented to the future.<sup>11</sup>

This brief outline should suffice to indicate that a history of the meanings of the word *Bund* is not adequate as a history of the problems of federal structure “conceptualized” in the course of *Reich* history. Semantic fields must be surveyed and the relation of *Einung* to *Bund*, of *Bund* to *Bündnis*, and of these terms to *Union* and *Liga* or to *Allianz* likewise investigated. It is necessary to question the (shifting) concepts in apposition, clarifying in this fashion the political fronts and religious and social groupings that have formed within federal potentialities. New constructions must be interpreted; e.g., it must be explained why the expression *Föderalismus*, entering language in the latter eighteenth century, did not in the nineteenth become a central concept of German constitutional law. Without the invocation of parallel or opposed concepts, without ordering generalized and particular concepts, and without registering the overlapping of two expressions, it is not possible to deduce the structural value of a word as “concept” either for the social framework or for the disposition of political fronts. Through the alternation of semasiological and onomasiological questions, *Begriffsgeschichte* aims ultimately at *Sachgeschichte*.<sup>12</sup>

The variant valency of the expression *Bund* can be especially suggestive of those constitutional conditions only conceptually formulable (or not) in terms of it. Insight into constitutional history is thus provided by a retrospectively oriented clarification and modern definition of past usage. Discovering whether the expression *Bund* was used as a concept associated with *Stand* rights, whether it was a concept of religious expectation, or whether it was a concept of political organization or an intentional concept based on the Law of Nations (as in Kant's minting of *Völkerbund*): clarifying such things means discovering distinctions which also "materially" organize history.

Put in other terms, *Begriffsgeschichte* is not an end in itself, even if it follows its own method. Insofar as it delivers indices and components for social history, *Begriffsgeschichte* can be defined as a methodologically independent part of sociohistorical research. From this autonomy issues a distinct methodological advantage related to the joint theoretical premises of *Begriffsgeschichte* and social history.

### On the Theory of *Begriffsgeschichte* and of Social History

All examples introduced so far—the history of the concepts of *Bürger*, democracy, and *Bund*—have one thing formally in common: they (synchronically) treat circumstances and (along the dimension of diachrony) their transformation. In this way, they are organized in terms of what in the domain of social history might be called structures and their change. Not that one can be directly deduced from the other, but *Begriffsgeschichte* has the advantage of reflecting this connection between concept and actuality. Thus there arises for social history a productive tension, pregnant with knowledge.

It is not necessary for persistence and change in the meanings of words to correspond with persistence and change in the structures they specify. Since words which persist are in themselves insufficient indicators of stable contents and because, vice versa, contents undergoing long-term change might be expressed in a number of very different ways, the method of *Begriffsgeschichte* is a *conditio sine qua non* of social historical questions.

One of the advantages of *Begriffsgeschichte* is that by shifting between synchronic and diachronic analysis, it can help to disclose the persistence of past experience and the viability of past theories. By changing perspective it is possible to make visible dislocations that exist between



words whose meaning is related to a diminishing content and the new contents of the same word. Moribund meanings which no longer correspond to reality, or realities which emerge through concepts whose meaning remains unrecognized, can then be noted. This diachronic review can reveal layers which are concealed by the spontaneity of everyday language. Thus the religious sense of *Bund* was never completely abandoned once it became descriptive of social and political organization in the nineteenth century. This was acknowledged by Marx and Engels when they created the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” out of the “articles of faith” of the *Bund der Kommunisten*.

*Begriffsgeschichte* is therefore capable of clarifying the multiple stratification of meaning descending from chronologically separate periods. This means that it goes beyond a strict alternation of diachrony and synchrony and relates more to the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*) that can be contained in a concept. Expressed differently, it deals with the theoretical premises of social history when it seeks to evaluate the short, medium, or long term, or to weigh events and structures against one another. The historical depth of a concept, which is not identical with the chronological succession of its meanings, in this fashion gains systematic import, which must be duly acknowledged by all sociohistorical research.

*Begriffsgeschichte* thus takes as a theoretical principle the idea that persistence and change must be weighed against each other, and measured in terms of each other. To the extent that this is conducted in the medium of language (both of the original source and of modern scientific discourse), it reflects the theoretical presuppositions with which even a social history concerned with “materiality” must come to terms.

It is a general property of language that each of the meanings of a word reach further than the singularity to which historical events can lay claim. Each word, even each name, displays a linguistic potentiality beyond the individual phenomenon that it characterizes or names at a given moment. This is equally true of historical concepts, even if they initially serve to conceptually assemble the singularity of complex structures of experience. Once “minted,” a concept contains within itself, purely linguistically, the possibility of being employed in a generalized manner, of constructing types, or of disclosing comparative insights. The reference to a particular party, state, or army linguistically involves a plane which potentially includes parties, states,

or armies. A history of related concepts leads to structural questions that social history has to answer.

Concepts do not only teach us the uniqueness of past meanings but also contain the structural possibilities, treat the concatenations of difference, which are not detectable in the historical flow of events. For the social historian prepared to think conceptually, seizing past facts, relations, and processes, these concepts become the formal categories which determine the conditions of possible history. It is only concepts which demonstrate persistence, repeatable applicability, and empirical validity—concepts with structural claims—which indicate that a once “real” history can today appear generally possible and be represented as such.

This becomes even clearer if the method of *Begriffsgeschichte* is applied to the relation of the language of original source and the language of analysis. All historiography operates on two levels: it either investigates circumstances already articulated at an earlier period in language, or it reconstructs circumstances which were not articulated into language earlier but which can be worked up with the help of specific methods and indices. In the first case, the received concepts serve as a heuristic means of access to the understanding of past reality. In the second case, history makes use of categories constructed and defined *ex post*, employed without being present in the source itself. This involves, for example, principles of theoretical economics being used to analyze early phases of capitalism in terms unknown at that time; or political theorems being developed and applied to past constitutional relations without having to invoke a history in the optative mood. In either case, *Begriffsgeschichte* makes plain the difference prevailing between past and present conceptualization, whether it translates the older usage and works up its definition for modern research, or whether the modern construction of scientific concepts is examined for its historical viability. *Begriffsgeschichte* covers that zone of convergence occupied by past and present concepts. A theory is therefore required to make understanding the modes of contact and separation in time possible.

It is clearly inadequate, to cite a known example, to move from the usage of the word *Staat* (*status*, *état*) to the modern state, as has been demonstrated in detail recently.<sup>13</sup> The question why, at a particular time, particular phenomena are brought into a common concept remains a suggestive one. Thus, for instance, it was only in 1848 that

the Prussian states were legally established as a state by Prussian jurisprudence, in spite of the established existence of the army and bureaucracy, i.e., at a time when liberal economic society had relativized the distinctions associated with the *Stände* and engendered a proletariat which had penetrated every province. Jurisprudentially, it was in the form of a bourgeois constitutional state that the Prussian state was first baptized. Certainly, singular findings of this nature do not prevent historical discourse from scientifically defining established historical concepts and deploying them in different periods and domains. If an extension of the term is warranted by a *Begriffsgeschichte*, then it is possible to talk of a “state” in the High Middle Ages. Naturally, in this way, *Begriffsgeschichte* drags social history with it. The extension of later concepts to cover earlier periods, or the extension of earlier concepts to cover later phenomena (as is today customary in the use of “feudalism”), establishes a minimum of common ground, at least hypothetically, in their objective domains.

The live tension between actuality and concept reemerges, then, at the level of the source language and of the language of analysis. Social history, investigating long-term structures, cannot afford to neglect the theoretical principles of *Begriffsgeschichte*. In every social history dealing with trends, duration, and periods, the level of generality at which one operates is given only by reflection on the concepts in use, in this way theoretically assisting clarification of the temporal relation of event and structure, or the succession of persistence and transformation.

For example, *Legitimität* was first a category in jurisprudence and was subsequently politicized in terms of traditionalism and deployed in interparty strife. It then took on a historicotheoretical perspective and was colored propagandistically according to the politics of whoever happened to be using the expression. All such overlapping meanings existed at the time when the term was scientifically neutralized by Max Weber, making it possible to establish typologies of forms of domination. He thus extracted from the available reserve of possible meanings a scientific concept; this was both formal and general enough to describe constitutional potentialities both long-term and short-term, shifting and overlapping, which then disclosed historical “individualities” on the basis of their internal structures.

*Begriffsgeschichte* embodies theoretical principles that generate statements of a structural nature which social history cannot avoid confronting.

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## History, Histories, and Formal Structures of Time

The dual ambiguity of the modern linguistic usage of *Geschichte* and *Historie*—both expressions denoting event and representation—raises questions that we wish to investigate further. These questions are both historical and systematic in nature. The peculiar meaning of history, such that it is at the same time knowledge of itself, can be understood as a general formulation of an anthropologically given arc linking and relating historical experience with knowledge of such experience. On the other hand, the convergence of both meanings is a historically specific occurrence which first took place in the eighteenth century. It can be shown that the formation of the collective singular *Geschichte* is a semantic event that discloses our modern experience. The concept “history pure and simple” laid the foundation for a historical philosophy within which the transcendental meaning of history as space of consciousness became contaminated with history as space of action.

It would be presumptuous to claim that, in the constitution of the concepts “history pure and simple” or “history in general” (underwritten specifically by German linguistic developments), all events prior to the eighteenth century must fade into a prehistory. One need only recall Augustine, who once stated that, while human institutions constituted the thematic of *historia*, *ipsa historia* was not a human construct.<sup>1</sup> History itself was claimed to derive from God and be nothing but the *ordo temporum* in which all events were established and according to which they were arranged. The metahistorical (and also temporal) meaning of *historia ipsa* is thus not merely a modern construction but had already been anticipated theologically. The interpretation according