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The Theory and Method of German "Begriffsgeschichte" and Its Impacts on the Construction of an European Political Lexicon

Confronted with the Idea of an European Political Lexicon we are in a time of rapid change: Twenty or even ten years ago the political integration of Europe was almost nothing but a political vision, today we are in fact on the way towards a rapid integration in almost all fields of political, economic, cultural and social development – in foreign policy, in constitutional law, in traffic, in standards of university training and so on.

But at the same time the prospect of a European Lexicon has become more realistic, too: whereas twenty years ago almost nobody in Europe would have thought it possible, that such a lexicon would be possible (perhaps with the exception of Melvin Richter, who, as an American, was already than much more used to integrate different cultural traditions – I remember a famous meeting of conceptional historians in New York in 1987, where Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner almost came to the point of beginning a kind of academic war between the German school of Begriffsgeschichte and the Anglo-Saxon Cambridge School) – today we are able to compare the advantageous of different methodological approaches with much more patience.

It is true, the so called "linguistic turn" of the 1980s had many aspects and versions, but today nobody would deny, that it also has linked them to a common movement and concern for language analysis all over the world. Today students of the history of language in Germany have learned to appreciate the methods of the English study of political "languages" and of French "discourses" in the concept of Michel Foucault and others, as much as scholars all over Europe, In Europe, Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands and Scandinavia, have started to study the German concept of Begriffsgeschichte. So today we are at the point to throw together what might be useful for a common project of an European lexicon. In doing so we have to compare the approaches in their theoretical and practical aspects.

I.

But before going into that business I would like to ask: What is the scheme, the "ratio", the general aim of such a project as the Political Lexicon, which we have in mind? It seems to me, that most of us would agree on the idea that Europe is not and shall not be a centralised national state like the USA, with but one language, one political culture and one common history, but a continent with many cultural centres. What we call Europe today, is the outcome, the result of a historical tradition, which from the 19th century onwards combined various, at least two very different tendencies: In economic terms we find a growing dominance of the big business centres of Western Europe at least from the 18th century onwards. The growth of population, traffic and industry was here much higher than in the rest of Europe. But at the same time we find a growing number of independent national states all over Europe, too, each of them with its own national history and cultural autonomy.

It is true, even in terms of cultural development these nations were not totally independent from one another: For instance in the religious structure of Europe, in constitutional law and many other branches of classical scholarship common roots of a European heritage can be defined in the Jewish, Greek and Roman culture of the Roman Empire. In the development of European arts it is not difficult to find Europe-wide connections between Dutch

and Italian, French and English, Spanish and German painters. In some branches of highly developed arts craft some nations even won a dominance at certain times, such as the French industry in toilet articles or the English in furniture.

But this tendency towards unification always was balanced by the counter-tendency of national diversification and autonomy: In literature for instance each European nation has built up a canon of "classical" authors: What is Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio for Italy, that is Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton for England; Moliere, Racine, Corneille for France; Cervantes for Spain; Goethe, Schiller, Lessing for Germany; Tolstoi, Turgenjew and Dostojewsky for Russia and soon. All European nations have cultivated their national language by national dictionaries, have collected their ancient songs and fairy-tales. All this is well known and has not to be repeated at this place.

So coming back to the idea of an European Political Lexicon I guess that we all agree, that it is the main purpose of such a project, to represent and develop the variety and richness of many national cultures within Europe – not in order to perpetuate the former animosity of political and cultural warfare within Europe, but in order to form our common European future on the basis of very different national experiences. We have to know from one another, f.i. concerning political and cultural centralisation what makes French people hopeful, but Germans anxious; we have to know, why English people like to rely on individual autonomy and local self government, whereas many Eastern societies lived better with patriarchal systems, why …

II.

Now, what kind of a Lexicon should it be and on which methodological approaches should it be based? Today among historians of conceptional history two different branches of studies are well established and much propagated: They may be called "discourse analysis" and "concept analysis". In looking to structures and changes of language, the one focuses on texts, the other on words, the one concentrates on systems of arguments, which are represented by sentences, the other on ideas, which are represented by words. In fact, in many aspects the approaches are not as different as they may seem in my presentation, but for the sake of argument and in order to discuss their distinguishing features, I would like to hold to this description for a moment. Looking closer to both branches of conceptional history we again have to distinguish between various schools or "philosophies".

(a)   In discourse analysis it was Michel Foucault, who by his "archéologie du savoir" already in the late 1960s did most for the acceptance and popularisation of discourse analysis in France and later in the United States. His concept of a 'discourse' was based on the idea, that we find coherent systems of knowledge in certain epochs of history, which are able to reign basic questions and arguments in all branches of human knowledge. It was the main concern of Foucault to reconstruct these basic scientific interests in a way, which in terms of epistemology made them historically independent. So he excluded as much the idea of historical origin and development as the idea of hermeneutic translation: For it was his conviction, that discourses can not be understood by translate them to our own time and language, but only by using them. But in spite of his great influence on discussions about discourse analysis all over the world, Foucault had very few followers in practical work. His concept of 'discourse' probably was too difficult to be used as an analytical tool. Thus to most historians it seemed extremely difficult to prove the empirical evidence of his description of discourses. I am sure, that he would not be amused by comparing him with historians of "ideas", but in his intuitive method of formulating the basic concepts of past knowledge systems he in fact reminds me to them very much.

(b) Much more based on empirical evidence is the approach of the so called "Cambridge school", established by John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, that is of those scholars, who follow the analysis of "political languages".

Originating from the old European concern for political philosophy this kind of discourse analysis is much more limited in its claim of explanation: It doesn't claim, as Foucault does, to represent the knowledge of a certain period of time on the whole, but only of one fraction, that is it allows to reconstruct the basic ideas and cultural practices of a certain political traditions without caring too much about texts in different spheres of political and social life. Its main concern is the idea of "republicanims", which from the late middle ages down to our own time serves as a model for many aspects of political and social life such as constitutional law, social organisation, public morals and aesthetic ideals. Its method is the reconstruction of a system of basic concepts, arguments and ways to handle things which are bound together in the term "language". 'Discourse' in this sense doesn't mean neither Saussure's "langage" nor a single text or speech, but the common features of texts and speeches of those who are engaged in the same "philosophy" of life.

Now looking to the various types of "concept analysis" one again has to distinguish between two schools or "philosophies" of language:

(a) When Reinhart Koselleck in the 1960s elaborated his theory of concept history (Begriffsgeschichte) he amalgamated various theoretical traditions: From Hans-Georg Gadamer he adopted the hermeneutic concept of "translation", that is the conviction, that in order to understand historical sources we have to translate them into our own language. This is what I would call the "realitic" feature of his theory. From Carl Schmitt he adopted the concept of political anthropology, that is the idea, that certain concepts "reign" certain periods of time dominating most of its arguments and giving the ground for what seems to be evident to the contemporaries. In Koselleck's concentration on "basic concepts"(Grundbegriffe) his theory is familiar to Michel Foucault's: Both, Koselleck and Foucault, take concepts as centres of cultural knowledge in the discourses of past societies. They cling to the (rather metaphysical) idea, that in a given period of time even the opponents of political debates usually rely on the same "meaning" of a concept, taking it only from different sides. What makes the difference is 1. Koselleck's conviction, that concepts are highly mobile semantic unites, which switch from one discourse to the other, attracting and widening their semantic potential out of all of them; and 2. his organisation of empirical evidence: For Koselleck basic concepts have to be defined in their actual usage: They are not only indicators to the past reality but also factors and instruments of historical change.

(b) Whereas Koselleck's concept of "concept history" still holds to the idealistic distinction between the representing linguistic form and the represented historical reality, Rolf Reichardt and his co-editors of the "Lexikon der politisch-sozialen Sprache in Frankreich 1680-1820" relies on the theory of Berger and Luckmann, who in their book "The social construction of reality" (Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit) of 1972 argued that what we are used to call "reality" is nothing but a system of knowledge. This had the practical consequence that in their approach it doesn't make sense to reconstruct the past reality independent of their contemporary representation. For historians this is hardly acceptable, because for them the reconstruction of the past is more than collecting the contemporary knowledge: We know that we know more about the past than contemporary people could know. On the other hand it is not difficult to give Koselleck's approach a constructivist interpretation: For what the historian calls (past) "reality" may be interpreted as well as our knowledge of the past. Instead of contrasting reality and its linguistic representation we would have to deal with two different constructions of past reality – without any loss of empirical evidence.

To sum up this part of my paper I would like to stress two facts:

1. Thinking of the basic units of linguistic analysis the concentration on concepts seems to be superior to that on discourses or languages out of various reasons: First, in terms of semantic analysis the concept is a more "mobile" unit than the discourse. The historian is able to follow it into very different contexts taking notice of a lot of semantic qualities, which are transported between them. For example let us take the concept 'enlightenment',

which by the 17th century was born in the context of weather descriptions, but later transported as a metapher to philosophy and history. Second, in a given context the concept very often is nothing more than the label or catchword for a discourses. So by analysing concepts we come to discourses anyway, but not the other way round. Third, because the concept is "bound" to a word, it is better to be isolated as a linguistic unit. This also helps to organise a lexicographical system by its alphabetical order.

2. It is true, the "realistic" approach of the German concept of Begriffsgeschichte relies on some metaphysical implication, which are opposed by constructivists today: For example, it takes the semantic analysis apart from what historians call the past "reality" (that is their own present reconstruction of it). And it relies on historical concepts like 'history', 'historical change' and others. It is true, this approach has to face some theoretical problems: one is the question how concepts may "change" over time; another the question how concepts may be defined without reference to the defining position of the present historian. But again the advantages of the realistic approach seem to prevail compared with the constructivist approach: First, because historians can hardly avoid to describe the past "realistically" from their own point of view in the present: It would be disastrous for their job, if they were unable to decide which out of various descriptions of any past event was right or wrong. Second, only in contrasting the world of "events" with that of "concepts" we are able to ask for the capacity of concepts either to represent reality or to interfere with it.

III.

So, what I would like to do now, is to start with some general remarks on the history of political concepts in Europe, including some empirical examples for what I would call a comparative analysis of concepts in Europe:

1. For the vast majority of basic concepts (including as many political as social as cultural and economic concepts – it is a fundamental fact, that most of them are taken from the ancient languages of Greek and Latin. There is almost no vital political term in any Western European language which doesn't go back to a Greek or Latin origin, either in its semiotic form or in its semantic content: 'state' and 'republic', 'monarchy' and 'government', 'constitution' and 'law', 'citizen' and 'mankind', 'the public' and 'the private', 'liberalism' and 'conservatism', 'liberty' and 'order', 'policy' and 'propaganda', 'reform' and 'revolution' are familiar terms in the sphere of politics, 'family' and 'honour', 'class' and 'race', 'emancipation' and 'treaty' may be examples from the sphere of social organisation, 'religion' and 'church', 'transcendence' and 'salvation' from the religious sphere and so on. Looking through the various European languages we find a common fund of classical terms which by the medieval and early modern period were used in all parts of Europe as the linguistic material and starting point for political and social theory.

2. But when the European nations began to emancipate from the Greek and Latin as languages of scholarship and political organisation – a long-lasting process which from the 13th to the 20th century covered more than 700 years – the national vocabularies also began to include regional semantic particularities into their political and social concepts. 'Res publica' now didn't mean the same in France and Germany, the term 'libertas' ('liberty', 'libertà' etc.) covered different rights and norms in Italy and England. But they still referred to the same basic ideas elaborated by 'classical' authors like Cicero, Aristotle and Polybius. To give but one example: When the term 'natio' was adopted to the modern political languages of Western Europe, it first referred to the various linguistic communities in a town or country, such as the French and German student groups at the University of Bologna in the 15th and 16th centuries. By the 17th century the term 'nation' already was well established in English and French for the civil society of these countries, being used in many contexts as a substitute for the constitutional term 'people' ('peuple' etc.). In France by the Frensh revolution 'nation' was adopted as the legal term for the new souvereign: 'la grande nation', as Napoleon called it. But whereas in England and France the term

'nation' could already be used for an existing political body, in countries like Germany, Spain and Italy (not to speak of Greece, Poland and Bulgaria) 'the nation' still was a idealistic and programmatic, if not an utopian concept. Later we find national diversifications like in Germany (around 1900) 'Kulturnation' (= nation defined by a common culture) and 'Staatsnation' (=nation defined by a common political body). Even today the various shapes of national concepts testify different national histories and traditions. It is of vital interest for the European Communion to keep their historically developed meaning in mind.

3. But the development of national concepts was – speaking in terms of linguistic structures – more than a semantic diversification of Latin and Greek semiotic materials: In many European nations the classical languages amalgamated with the regional vernacular, giving birth to new semiotic models. But there is a remarkable difference to be found between Romanic and Germanic resp. Slavonian languages: The more remote from the centre of the Roman Empire the more linguistic material was taken from the vernacular in building political and social concepts which were able to interpret the regional and national structures of society. Let us take the example of the term 'civis': In Italian and Spanish we find the terms of 'cittadino' and 'ciudadano' (both derived from lat. 'civitas'), in French and English the terms 'citoyen' and 'citizen'. In German from the early modern times onwards we only find the term 'Bürger' (Danish 'borger'), as an equivalent to 'civis' signifying both, the citizen of a town and of a state or nation. Similar expressions can be found in Italian ('borghese'), French ('bourgeois'), English ('burger'), but they are limited to the social group of inhabitants of a town, vested with all rights and privileges of this group, or from the 19th century onwards to the middle-class, the so-called 'bourgeoisie'. A comparative investigation into the concepts in English, French and German has shown, how much more the German and English concepts of 'Bürgertum' and 'burgher-life' was influenced by the culture and memory of medieval town-life, compared with the strong impacts of Roman law in France.[1]

This shows on the one side, how in most Romanic countries the existence of a second idiom allowed to differentiate between various semantic layers, leaving space for the representation and elaboration of new social and political patterns; it shows on the other side, how the vernacular was used for building new semantic architectures. The usage of the Germanic terms 'freedom' (beside 'libertas'), of 'open' (beside 'publicus' and 'communis'), of 'Geschichte' (beside 'historia'), of 'Gesetz' (beside 'ius'), of 'Bund' (beside 'foedus', 'conventio' etc.) would give other examples for this important dimension of variety and diversification. It bestowed the Romanic and Germanic languages with a richness of expression, which was vital for their culture not only in political, but as well in religious and social terms. (For the Slavonian languages, I hope that somebody else will be able to extend and limit my observations. The only hint which I am able to give in this respect, would be to the importance of Greek at least in the sphere of religious and ecclesiastical concepts.)

4. Finally we find a strong secondary influence of modern national languages like French and English on other European languages in certain fields of cultural life: The term 'constitution' goes back to the Latin 'constitutio', but the modern concept was adopted to most European languages from the French and English definition of a constitution in the late 18th century. The same is to be observed from concepts like 'industry', 'emancipation', 'parliament', 'policy' and many others. But there are other ways of influence from Eastern to Western languages, too: As we all know, many monetary concepts (like 'deposit', 'conto' etc.) were developed in Italy already by the late medieval times. The German language developed a lot of religious terms like 'Erweckung' (awakening), 'Konfession' (confession in the sense of "denomination") and so on. For the future of Europe it is of major importance to acknowledge and appreciate the cultural traditions which stand behind all these concepts. This

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[1] Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, Ulrike Spree, Willibald Steinmetz: Drei bürgerliche Welten? Zur vergleichenden Semantik der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland, Frankreich und England, in: H.-J. Puhle (Hg.), Bürger in der Gesellschaft der Neuzeit. Wirtschaft – Polirtik – Kultur. Göttingen 1991, S. 14-58.

doesn't mean that we should stick to them for ever, but rather that we are aware of common traditions and differ-
ences within the spectrum of national heritages within Europe.

IV.

Let me finish this paper with some remarks on the organisation of the lexikographical project, which has to be
planned within the next few years. I would suggest to think of to layers of organisation:

1. We need national groups of scholars which are specialised in the history of concepts and willing to cooperate
and carry the project by their own semantic investigations. Each of these national groups should consist at least
of 5 – 7 scholars, who are ready to take over the "national" part of an article. The articles have to be elaborated
in collaboration with scholars of other cultural regions in Europe. The communicating language should be Eng-
lish, and English should be the language of the publication (but we should discuss the possibility of national
translations of the Lexicon.) In each participating country there should be a national editorial board, run by one
of the national administrators. For each article one of the national editorial boards should take over the organisa-
tion of the working group, including the organisation of meetings and the editorial work of the article.

2. Each national group should be lead by two scholars who form with the leaders of the other national groups a
board of administration and planning. This international board should elaborate the scheme of the project (in-
cluding the election of concepts and the methodological guidelines), apply for the financial funds (if possible in
Brussel), and it should initiate the working groups on each concept article and care for the final publication.

These are only some central ideas, which have to be discussed, elaborated and modified. But in any case I think
it is time to begin.