## Review

Reinhart Koselleck: *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2010, 388 s.

# Koselleck's Untimely Meditations

Even though the edition itself never explicitly states this point, the latest volume of historical essays by Reinhart Koselleck, posthumously collected and published by Carsten Dutt, engages in a dialogue with another work, by another author, which was published almost 140 years ago. The work that comes to mind is, of course, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, which came out in four parts between 1873 and 1876 and which has seen a number of English translations: *Untimely Meditations* (Walter Kaufmann), *Thoughts Out of Season* (Anthony M. Ludovici), *Unmodern Observations* (William Arrowsmith). On the level of titles the idea of the untimely is retained in one of the most elegant and original essays in the present volume, on *Goethes unzeitgemäße Geschichte*, "Goethe's untimely history". As everyone who has read Nietzsche knows, however, his essays were not *unzeitgemäß* in any traditional sense of the word, except in the way they strayed from the well-trodden path of the *Zeitgeist*; on the contrary, they intervened quite directly in the most urgent and immediate questions of the time, namely the uses of theology, history, philosophy and music for the purposes of cultural and intellectual refinement and progress.

Returning to the recently published collection of Koselleck's essay, the title of the volume, suggested to the editor by the author himself (365), doesn't only echo the more or less forgotten, intriguing work by Theodor Lessing, discussed in the title essay, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*, from 1919, but also – and for most readers, primarily – the second of Nietzsche's untimely meditations": *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* from 1874. In his comprehensive discussion of Nietzsche's text, Koselleck points out how Nietzsche in his attack on the reigning, "modern" idea of history as inherently meaningful reintroduces the classical rhetorical-philological concept of *historia* – a plu-

rality of histories about various topics written for specific purposes. To Nietzsche, however, *historia* is not life's teacher, as in the topos *historia magistra vitae*, but rather its humble servant; similarly, life itself isn't made up of a series of intentions and actions, but is the manifestation of a vital force or energy. As Koselleck reads him, Nietzsche's arguments amounts to a full-fledged attack on the four axioms governing the modern notion of history: that it moves forward towards a goal (*causa finalis*), that it moves by necessity (*causa efficiens*), that it has an inherent principle of justice, and that it progresses in accordance with the ages of man (25-27). And he concludes: "Nietzsche's real achievement was to expose through epistemological arguments history as a pluralistic field of action, which can only be analyzed to the extent that it is freed of all constructions and presuppositions of meaning" (28). To have recognized this distinction between history as a field of actions and events, on the one hand, and the representations and narratives of these actions and events, often of a teleological, deterministic, legitimizing or anthropological nature, on the other, is an experience shared by the 19th century philologist and philosopher and the 20th century historian alike.

If we were to look for a common topic for this collection of essays by Koselleck and thus be unfaithful to the confession of the editor that his only the ambition has been "to make substantial contributions – *Gehaltvolles* – accessible in a appropriate format" (365), the link to Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* might give us a first clue. Even though history as event – *Ereignis* – and narrative – *Erzählung* – have been a major topic in all previous collections of Koselleck's essays and articles, *Vergangene Zukunft* from 1979, *Zeitschichten* from 2000 and *Begriffsgeschichten* from 2006, the present volume offers a broader perspective, reaching across all four main fields of his work: historical semantics, theory of history, social history and the practices of memory. For those who have followed the republication of Koselleck's essayistic work at Suhrkamp and who for some time have been waiting for the planned volume on political iconology and the practices of memory, this book might be something of a disappointment, since the essays concerned with these particular topics are not included, but are saved for a separate volume to be published some time in the future. In the meantime there are lot of comfort to be found in this volume of "untimely meditations",

criss-crossing through more or less Koselleck's entire work, adding different nuances to old and well-known questions and even raising some new ones.

The essays selected for the volume have in common that they have been published in rather unknown and inaccessible journals and books, or in a few cases, not at all. As stressed by the editor, who wants to avoid the impression that he has given himself to what Koselleck himself referred to as "editors looting the *Nachlass* of a dead author" (367), the four previously unpublished texts were all prepared for print by the author. If there have been any additional criteria at work in the selection process, like relevance, originality or – on the contrary – coherence with the existing work, is left in the dark. Surely, this kind of editorial self-reflection, situating the texts within the larger body of published and unpublished works, will be required in future volumes from the Koselleck *Nachlass* in the Marbach Archive. In this volume the integration of the texts in the volume with other, older and newer contributions, chronologically and thematically, remains the task of the readers.

More than anything the implicit and explicit dialogue with Nietzsche's work from the 1870s serves to highlight the notion of the untimely, *das Unzeitgemäße*, as a prism for understanding the essays. There are at least three kinds of untimeliness at work in the volume: first, the untimeliness of the publication itself, due to the de- and recontextualization of texts previously published or held as lectures in a period from 1971 to 2006; second, the untimeliness of the authors and works discussed, as in the case of Goethe, but also exemplified by Preussian history and historiography, which play a major role in the genesis of Koselleck's longtime enemy of choice in post-war historiography, the idea of a German *Sonderweg*; third, the untimeliness of historical time, in a phenomenological sense, which can be said to constitute one of the most significant and central topics in Koselleck's work as a whole, often represented in the chiastic form of the *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*.

The volume is organized in three parts: *Theorieskizzen*, "theoretical drafts", which contains six essays of different length and ambition, adding to the theoretical discussions going on in the already published volumes; *Zeitbilder*, "images of time", which is made up of essays discussing the temporal and spatial conditions for historical experiences,

as well as their historiographic representations in concepts referring to epochs, centuries, nations, empires etc.; and finally, *Porträts and Erinnerungen*, "potraits and memoirs", in which the editor has brought together a series of biographical essays, about both colleagues and historical figures, from Johann Chladenius and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to two of Koselleck's teachers, Werner Conze and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Compared to the volumes from 2000 and 2006, *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* give the impression of a rather random and disparate selection of essays. Still, there is something fundamentally adequate and appealing about the reluctance of the editor to separate the philosophical from the historical, the theoretical from the empirical, the studies of concepts from the studies of people and events. Undoubtedly, the essence in Koselleck's thinking is to be found in the meandering movements between these different fields and topics. The importance of this communication between disciplines such as history, linguistics, philosophy and sociology is stressed by the author on several occasions – not least in the previously unpublished essay on interdisciplinarity, given as a lecture in Tokyo in 1978, long before this concept – "interdisciplinarity" – emerged as staple and a prime concept of movement, prognostic on the brink of utopian, in debates on research policy.

This particular essay on interdisciplinarity, however, also serves to remind us of the dangers of republishing essays written for a particular audience and a particular pragmatic context. Repackaged in a new format, a hardcover book, some of these texts – a lecture written for a guest professorship in Tokyo in 1978, another held at a literary conference in Düsseldorf in 1978, a *laudatio* and a memorial speech – unfold an almost erie, untimely quality. Indeed, they *are* untimely, in the most banal chronological sense of the word, because they are republished more than thirty years after they were written. Reading them today, we might get the feeling that some of these texts were indeed not, to use a famous Koselleckian distinction, meant for the slowly unfolding time of historical and philosophical knowledge, but for the considerably faster, even accelerating time of political and biographical events.

In the already mentioned essay on interdisciplinarity Kosellecks presents his experiences from the establishment of the *Zentrum für interdisziplinare Forschung in Bielefeld (ZiF)*, where he was one of the direc-

tors, for a Japanese audience. In the light of recent discussions on the need for interdisciplinary research, as a way for the human and social sciences to emerge from their current financial and ideological crisis, Koselleck's experiences from the last wave of interdisciplinarity, in the 1970s, might seem a bit outdated. He ends his essay with the following invitation to all other sciences on behalf of the historians: "Why should the philologists be our only partners, because they can help us read an interpret the written sources? It should be all sciences, because none of them can exist without their historical dimension." (67) Today, this naive optimism on behalf of the historical dimension can only serve as a reminder of some of the dramatic shifts that have taken place within the European universities during the last thirty years, breaking up the slow institutional cycles of repetition and turning traditional disciplines into cultures of innovation, which are more than happy to forget their own history. In this sense the untimely, oudated character of Koselleck's experiences with interdisciplinarity might help us to better understand and historicize our own situation.

In a similar way the hommages to Karl Jaspers, Werner Conze, François Furet, Shulamit Volkov and Hans-Georg Gadamer, written for specific occasions, such as Gadamer's death, the awarding of the Gundolf-Preis to Volkov, the Arendt-Preis to Furet etc. , belong to a different kind of temporality than the theoretical and historical essays. Not that they are uninteresting or without important insights, but they don't have the strong, relentless focus and the theoretical complexity, which made John Zammito compare Koselleck to the intellectual type of the hedgehog, who "worries his big idea over and over again" (Zammito, 126). Masterpieces of the epideictic genre, they take the reader back to the rhetorical situation in question and invites him or her to join the crowd of celebrators or mourners. Outside of this situation they are less powerful and one can ask if they really belong in a book together with essays which will take up a seminal place in the reception of Koselleck's works. One surprising and interesting effect of collecting these untimely texts in the same volume, however, deserves to be mentioned in its own right: Read together, the essays on Jaspers, Conze, Volkov and Gadamer draw up a history of how scholars coped with the Third Reich, both during and after – from Jaspers's discussion of col-

lective guilt, to Conze's shift from *Volksgeschichte* to *Strukturgeschichte* after 1945, to Volkov's strictly analytical and comparative studies of German antisemitism, and finally, to Gadamers infamous Herder-lecture in Paris 1941, in which certain passages were later revised. In the way he lays out dilemmas and confronts accusations Koselleck employs the epideictic genre, which, contrary to general opinion was never meant only to praise, but also to criticize, in accordance with the best Aristotelian traditions.

Untimeliness, however, is not only a quality of the essays themselves in relation to their present and future contexts, it is also a historical topic in its own right, which comes to the fore in all three parts of the volume, most prominently in the second and third. Among the biographical essays are three texts on three very different historical figures born in the 18th century: Johann Martin Chladenius, the godfather of hermeneutical and historical method, Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the order of the Illuminati, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the supreme giant of German literary and intellectual history. In these three essays, among the best in the volume, Koselleck highlights how these men were in their different ways untimely, out of sync, asynchronous with their own time. Chladenius is seen as the "a last crown witness of the prehistoric, premodern world" (272), while Weishaupt was the first, who attempted to put modern philosophy of history, *Geschichtsphilosophie*, into political practice. The true symbol of untimeliness, however, is Goethe, who, according to Koselleck, always avoided, even actively resisted to be made a representative of the so-called "history". In Goethe's case being untimely didn't mean to be conservative in a political or social sense, even though his aversion against the revolution in France often has been interpreted in this way. Goethe, Koselleck argues, was untimely due to his language, which resisted all kinds of reductionist labels, conservative, liberal, progressive etc. by producing "an added value, which can neither be fully understood nor fully exploited" (291). Across a wide range of genres, annalistic diaries, far-reaching chronicles and reflective memoirs Goethe were able to reflect on his own historical situation, the temporal paradoxes of his own time, and thus, to "historicize himself" (293). As opposed to many of his contemporaries, Goethe didn't identify with history, write himself into it, but was able

to keep a certain analytical distance, observe the temporal breaks, analyze and describe them. In this sense, Koselleck concludes, in a way that makes us suspect a certain degree of identification between the historian and his object, Goethe was both timely and untimely: "Our present perspective depends on whether we assume his perspective, which exposes that which repeats itself or that which lasts, or if we give in to political enthusiasm, which can only guide us from one day to the next" (303-4). I think there can be no doubt where Koselleck's own preferences lie.

Among the other studies dealing with the historical condition of non-synchronicity, non-contemporaneity, of untimeliness, are two essays on Prussia, *Lernen aus der Geschichte Preußens?,* "To learn from the history of Prussia?", and *Zur Rezeption der preußischen Reformen in der Historiographie*, "On the reception on the Prussian reforms in historiography". In the first Koselleck asks what kind of lessons can be drawn from the history of Prussia, the only dominating power in modern European history which "has later disappeared", as he puts it (151). In historiography as well as in public memory the history of Prussia has been linked to militarism and cultures of subordination, except – one could add – during the recent process of rebuilding Berlin as the capital of the united Germany, when the Prussian inheritance has come to represent urbanism, tolerance and liberal principles. More generally, however, and especially in the foreign perception of German history, Prussian militarism has constituted one important aspect of the alleged German *Sonderweg*, complementing the political immaturity of the German Idealist tradition. The idea of the *Sonderweg*, either in its original exceptionalist or in its later more analytic form, is another way of conceptualizing Germany's untimeliness, its asynchronicity with other national histories, especially Britain and France, and with the development of European democracy in general. But, as Koselleck never fails to address, the whole idea of a German *Sonderweg* is absurd, because it presupposes that there could be something like a standard path, or in temporal terms, a standard rhythm of European history, when in reality all European histories are *Sonderwege*. In the historiographical reception of the Prussian reforms from 1800 and onwards, historians such as Droysen, Treitschke and Mehring, have used Prussian history to support

their own political programs, liberal or conservative. How, then, is it possible to learn from the history of Prussia, without either uncritically inheriting the idea of the *Sonderweg*, or by – just as uncritically – turning it into a field for political battles?

As every Koselleck-reader knows, much of his work is dedicated to showing how the rhetorical *historia magistra vitae*-paradigm collapses and is replaced by an idea and an experience of history as movement, as constant change. As a consequence, past events cannot tell us anything , or at least very little, about what is going to happen in the future – the two are, as Koselleck puts is, "asymmetrical" (Koselleck 1989, 366). There is, in other words, no way we can learn from history. Nevertheless, everything Koselleck has ever written, seems to belie this very same claim, constantly exploring the ways in which the past can yet inform the present and the future, how history can still be a source of normative and prognostic knowledge. In the process the *historia magistra vitae*-paradigm is replaced by another paradigm, which is best summed up in the formula of *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*, non-contemporaneity or asynchronicity, or, in Nietzschean terms, untimeliness – all referring to the experience that in social and political processes there is always more that one time, one temporality in play: "Faced with the plurality of historical connections", Koselleck writes, "one must separate analytically between different levels, which are addressed methodically in different ways": first, the "singular histories", *Einzelgeschichten*, which can only give rise to historical lessons to the extent that some of the factors involved, political, social or psychological, are presumed to be constant; second, "the longer-time conditions for possible singular histories", which remains the same and thus repeat themselves from day to day, from year to year, for a longer period of time; and finally, the "long-time processes, which in their turn change the structural conditions" and thus the possible singular histories (170-171). As an example of these deeper processes of change and repetition, Koselleck analyzes the successful establishment of the customs union, *Zollverein*, as a paradigm for European integration, from which lessons can still be drawn – but only, he emphasizes, if one also recognizes the fact that Prussia acted as a hegemonial power, openly or in secret, in a very different way than any of the European states in the post-war era.

In the two final essays in the second part of the volume Koselleck discusses how the cultural and historical practice of learning from history is linked to the recent turn to memory, to the "memorial turn", to quote a much-used phrase in today's human and social sciences, in a field to which Koselleck, especially in his later years, have made important contributions. However, as already mentioned, only two of these contributions appear in this volume, which both discusses the problem of "negative memory" – how to remember crimes and catastrophes, so prominent in German history. "To commemorate the sufferings and the dead, for which we as conquered nation must take responsibility, is a task of decency and honesty towards the survivors, which we shouldn't let anybody take from us" (261), Koselleck writes, reminding us of the immediate relevance and possible effects of his theoretical claims.

Indeed, it is rather unusual that a collection of rather disparate essays, like this one, also offers substantial theoretical insight, inviting us to rethink or at least refine some of the most central topics in the work as a whole. But in *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* we can find such insight, particularly in the first part, *Theorieskizzen*, and particularly in what turned out to be the last essay Koselleck published in his lifetime, entitled "Structures of repetition in language and history", *Wiederholungsstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte* from 2006. The powerful idea of "structures of repetition", which brings to convergence Koselleck's intellectual training within German *Sozialgeschichte* and his philosophical engagement with theories of time and experience in the tradition from Heidegger and Gadamer, has – at least to my knowledge – never been as consequently spelled out as in this essay. On the other hand, the seminal and continuous importance of this theoretical figure is also anticipated by the oldest essay in the collection, *Wozu noch Historie?*, "Why do we still write history?", dating back from 1971.

Much of the criticism directed at Koselleck, most recently and poignantly in a book by Kathleen Davies (Davies 2008, 97-95), concerns his way of privileging modernity, the *Neuzeit*, in terms of a historical period completely set off and different from everything that precedes it. In this critical approach Koselleck is turned into a full-fledged and rather one-eyed theorist of modernity, and, as a consequence, his work on multiple and contrasting experiences of time into a theory of peri-

odization. But is this really what Koselleck's "theory of historical times" is about, to epitomize modernity and the modern experience of history in terms of a force moving from the past, through the present an into the future?

This can only be – at best – half the truth. In several of Koselleck's essays there are attempts to bridge, or may be rather, to blur this gap between *Neuzeit* and Antiquity, Middle Ages or Renaissance, to mention only three of the labels in question. Thus, on the one hand Koselleck posits the collapse of the paradigm of *historia magistra vitae*, but, on the other hand, he never fails to express a normative preference for this use of history, or rather of histories, in plural, to the self-fulfilling prophecy of modern *Geschichtsphilosophie*. In a similar way, Koselleck never hesitates to point out how certain characteristics of a typically modern idea of history can be found already in Greek constitution history, in Augustine and in Bossuet, in different, but still recognizably related forms (Jordheim 2011, 460-461). This idea of a continuity between the premodern and the modern is summed up at the end of the essay *Wozu noch Historie?*, where the theory of periodization is replaced by a much more sophisticated and complex theory of multiple and multi-layered historical times: "The epochal difference between 'history as such' – the space of experience of historicism – and the old style histories […] can only be bridged if we ask for the temporal structures which might be particular for both history in singular and histories in plural" (50). In this way, Koselleck continues, the question of temporal structures opens up the entire field of historical research, prior to and beyond "the semantic threshold of experience around 1780" (ibid.).

Rather than a theory of modernity, or more generally, a theory of periodization Koselleck presents us with a theory of untimeliness, or, as he often puts it, a theory of *die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* (51). History is never really synchronous with itself, but is made up of contrasting and competing temporal structures, "structures of repetition" – ranging from total repetition to total innovation, neither of which exists in their pure form, but always "mixed in different ways" (99). All actual changes, the slow ones, the fast ones and those that go on for a really long time, he claims, "are linked to the variable interplay between repetition and uniqueness": "In this way it is possible to show what in our

so-called *Neuzeit* is really new and doesn't repeat anything of what was before – or what was really always there and only comes back in a new shape" (98). And thus, history can avoid falling victim to periodizations, between 'old' and 'new', which says little or nothing about historical reality, what Koselleck refers to as *wenig oder nichtssagende Periodenbestimmung* (ibid.).

Indeed, this is the most innovative and decisive contribution of this latest volume *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte*: to make a first and still rather preliminary draft for a systematic theory of the structures of repetition. In his draft Koselleck distinguishes between five different structures, or, as he often puts it, four different *Zeitschichten*, layers of time: first, the non-human conditions for our experiences, mostly of a cosmological nature, such as the earth's movement around the sun; second, the biological conditions for our lives, differences between the sexes, procreation, birth and death, but also anthropological structures such as hierarchies, exclusion/inclusion, generations, or, in his own words, *Oben-Unten, Innen-Außen* and *Früher-Später* (103); third, the structures of repetition typical of the human condition, particularly institutions, like law, religion and work; fourth, those repeatable elements that are inherent even in unique events, which can be illustrated by comparing the American, the French and the Russian revolution and identifying the common patterns and which manifest themselves in prophecies, prognoses, and plans for the future; fifth, the structures of repetition in language, both in semantics, syntax and pragmatics, though at very different speeds.

It goes without saying that these five types of repeatability are never completely synchronous, they don't move at the same speed, they cannot be reduced to periods or to absolute differences between old and new. To identify, explore and discuss this kind of asynchronicities, these instances of untimeliness, and their cultural, social and political conditions and effects, beyond traditional periodizations, is among the most important legacies of Koselleck's rich work – made even richer and even more important by this last volume of collected essays.

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## Literature

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