



Book Review: *Der Riss  
in der Zeit. Reinhart  
Kosellecks ungeschriebene  
Historik* by Stefan-Ludwig  
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## BOOK REVIEW

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After Reinhart Koselleck's death in 2006, a real surge of studies on his work has taken place, and additional collections of Koselleck's articles have been published. *Begriffsgeschichten* (2006) was published a few months after Koselleck's death by Carsten Dutt, who also published the volume *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* (2010). The long-awaited volume *Geronnene Lava: Texte zum politischen Totenkult und Erinnerung* (2023a) has been published recently, as well as, Koselleck's correspondence with Carl Schmitt (2019) and Hans Blumenberg (2023b).

Around 20 years ago, I published one of the first major studies on Koselleck, comparing his work to that of Quentin Skinner. It carried the Weberian title, *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe* (2004). I operated with written texts, some of which I received from Koselleck himself and others I collected from different libraries. I also drew upon a few conversations that I had with Koselleck, but I did not consult any archival sources, which in Koselleck's lifetime were not widely available. The book is a textual analysis of a historically oriented political theorist, not a biography or a historiography of Koselleck himself.

A part of the Koselleck boom is the extensive secondary literature on his work. I have not followed it in detail, but will mention here only the extensive German-language volumes *Begriffene Geschichte* by Hans Joas and Peter Vogt (2011) and *Reinhart Koselleck als Historiker* by Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder (2021). In the over 1000-page volume written by Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder (2017), Reinhart Koselleck is the embodiment of conceptual history to such a degree that he was not even mentioned in the 'Index of persons,' since he referred regularly in the book. Most of these new volumes use Koselleck's *Nachlass* at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach as well as other archival sources and interviews, casting new light on the intellectual profile of Koselleck.

The most recent addition to Koselleckiana is Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann's book *Der Riss in der Zeit: Kosellecks ungeschriebene Historik*. The title refers to Koselleck's famous

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remark in the ‘Vorwort’ to volume VII of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* that he did not have time to write the article on *Zeit* for that volume (Koselleck 1992).

Hoffmann’s book is the most impressive contribution to the Koselleck boom. It offers a reappraisal of Koselleck’s work around the concepts of time and history. It not only moves him farther from the notorious orbit of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, which still shapes the reputation of Koselleck, especially in the Anglophone world. Hoffmann suggests a radical revision of the conventional view of Koselleck as a historian and theorist of historical times. It shows not so much Koselleck as a theorist of *Sattelzeit* and its hypotheses for the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, but rather studies Koselleck as contemporaneous with National Socialism, as a soldier in the Wehrmacht, a prisoner-of-war in Karaganda, and a citizen and historian in post-war (West) Germany. Beginning in the 1990s, Koselleck began to write more about his personal experiences, with the judgement that it is the world wars, National Socialism in Germany, and the Soviet Union under Stalin that have marked the most important *Zeitenwende*, in modern history, as Hoffmann notes, borrowing the *bonmot* used by Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the outbreak of Putin’s war against Ukraine.

A short, lesser-known text that is key to Hoffmann’s interpretation of Koselleck is ‘Laudatio auf François Furet’ (published in the literary journal *Sinn und Form* in 1998). The intention of this speech was to celebrate Furet as a re-thinker of the French Revolution, polemising against its messianism and utopianism, a view shared by Koselleck since his dissertation *Kritik und Krise* (1954, published as a book in 1959). More important was that Koselleck’s short article tells of his inviting Hannah Arendt to Heidelberg after the German edition of her totalitarianism book was published in 1955. He reports on the disinterest of his colleagues, but of the enthusiasm of students for Arendt’s lecture: ‘Heidegger und Lukács, Kojève und Jaspers bewegen sich noch im Vorfeld der Katastrophe. Nicht so Hannah Arendt.’ In other words, unlike these famous colleagues, Koselleck shared with Arendt the view that Nazism and World War II should be judged as a critical turning point for post-war political thought and historiography.

Hoffmann emphasises that, besides the authors just mentioned, two other famous colleagues of Koselleck not only never studied, but rather ignored the Nazi era in their writings. Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Ulrich Wehler were sometime colleagues of Koselleck – Habermas in Heidelberg and Wehler in Bielefeld – but represented a modernisation theory through which they were unable to understand Koselleck’s research agenda. In a review of *Kritik und Krise* in 1960, Habermas disagreed with Koselleck’s rejection of the Enlightenment philosophy of history, and Wehler, in *Stichworte zur ‘Geistigen Situation der Zeit’* (1979, edited by Habermas), predicted that conceptual history would lead to a dead end (*Sackgasse*), in line with his *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*. Both were also in part responsible for the belatedness of the reception of Koselleck’s work in the Anglophone world.

With Arendt, Koselleck shared the idea that the Nazi regime was something unprecedented. Much more than a dictatorship, it represented a kind of *hubris* that held everything to be manipulable by human effort, in Arendt’s terms, replacing ‘politics as action’ by fabrication, including the industrial fabrication of dead bodies. For Koselleck, this was a personal experience, as he was imprisoned by the Soviets at the end of the war and held in compulsory labour in Auschwitz in June–July 1945, at which time he realised that the rumours of the German death camps were true. He was also held in the prisoner-of-war camp in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, until September 1946, after which he was permitted to return to Germany. Even if Koselleck and Arendt held the

Nazi regime to be the epitome of totalitarian rule, they also regarded the Soviet system under Stalin as being ruled by a similar *hubris* and uniform ideal of human life.

My own book went beyond *Begriffsgeschichte* and discussed its relationships to Koselleck's theorising on historical times, war memorials and the anthropological justification for his *Historik*. The topics of Hoffmann's book are familiar to me, and his deeper understanding of them makes for fascinating reading without requiring me to give up my reservations towards Koselleck's anthropological 'constants' (*Konstante*) in his theorisation of historical times. Koselleck (philosophical) anthropology, in the sense of a German tradition since the early twentieth century, is well known with such names as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen. In his tribute to Hans-Georg Gadamer (published in 1987 and included in the collection *Zeitschichten*), he reads Heidegger and Schmitt in the style of that tradition and establishes his central conceptual pairs of the human condition around their work.

The 'Laudatio' quote alludes to Hoffmann's current reading of Arendt (specifically *The Human Condition* (1958)), which he sees as being an inherent part of Koselleck's anthropological justification of his theories of historical times. For Hoffmann, the point is that she considers the Nazi and totalitarian experience as critical for understanding the human condition and the political action corresponding to it. For Koselleck, the point is the intelligibility of historical time; not the movement (*Bewegung*), but the agility (*Beweglichkeit*) is the condition for a possible history, as he states already in his essays from the early 1970s. It is easy to understand that not everything can change at a time, and it may be important to suggest what cannot change. As Arendt's and Koselleck's condemnation of the Nazi death camps and the totalitarian system more generally had to do with the complicity of such systems in destroying the very conditions of human life, it is therefore important to identify what counts as the human condition.

For Arendt in *The Human Condition*, the central anthropological pairs enabling one to act politically were: natality and plurality; acting and speaking; and forgive and promise. She sees the Nazi death camps as attempts to eliminate these conditions and thereby also eliminate politics as a human activity. Her judgement of the political thought of the modern era was that the enabling conditions had given way to a superhuman concept of 'history,' in the name of which totalitarianism was justified if the political grounds for opposing or preventing it were insufficient.

Over the decades, Koselleck proposed different candidates for the anthropological constants of human life. The trouble with such lists is that they may contain problematic commitments, such as widespread assumptions within the context of the author. I think that the 'generativity' condition in his Gadamer tribute 'Historik und Hermeneutik' still presupposes a quasi-natural division of human beings into men and women, which today appears outdated and has become itself contingent and thus politicised. Hoffmann has now identified that, in the final version of Koselleck's thought, a formalisation of the conceptual parts has taken place, leaving only three pairs: before–after (*vorher-nachher*), inside–outside (*innen-außen*) and up–down (*oben-unten*).

The heuristic value of such formal categories for historical and political analysis is obvious, but what could be politicised would rather be the very exclusiveness of the pairs, not in the sense of looking for a consensus or compromise, but rather disrupting the exclusiveness. Schmitt's famous *Freund-Feind* pair was intended to make a clear-cut distinction purged from all mixtures, ambiguities, and so on. Operating with at

least seemingly exclusive pairs might be understood as a Schmittian remnant, even in the late work of Koselleck.

Hoffmann emphasises two major points, with a prominent position in the late work of Koselleck. In the years before his death, Koselleck speaks in several essays and interviews on the structures of repetition (*Wiederholungsstrukturen*, see *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte*). One could claim that repetitive movement not only forms a contrast to the new and the unique, but also relativises the immutability of the anthropological constant. I tried on various occasions to ask Koselleck about the difference between historical and political times, but I never received a sufficient answer. Maybe his experience was so much shaped by the extreme cases of totalitarian regimes that he was never interested in the singularity of democratic and parliamentary procedures, practices and debates. Now I could claim that the practice of repeatedly organised elections is necessary for democratic politics, whereas parliamentarism operates with several rounds of procedurally regulated iterations of debates in plenums and committees. Perhaps I should look closely at Koselleck's repetition vocabulary from this perspective.

Lastly, I could mention a fashionable term in contemporary academic vocabulary: 'collective memory.' Koselleck strongly opposed this concept and emphasised the singularity and individuality of memories as a condition for properly interpreting historical events, which at the outset might appear to be shared by individuals acting in the same context. It is high time to get rid of this mythology of collective memories and concepts, as did not only Max Weber, but also Reinhart Koselleck.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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