

# The Concept of Conceptual History(*Begriffsgeschichte*) and the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*”

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Lucian Hölscher\* | Professor, Department of History,  
Ruhr-Universität Bochum University, Germany

The concept of conceptual history is based on a simple idea: the idea that language is a basic structure of the historical world. In understanding and describing, as much as in acting and changing things in the past and present, we rely on words and sentences. Though not the only tool, language is the most important one that human beings have to come to terms with their life and their environment. As part of this idea of language, we have learned to distinguish between language and reality in terms of the distinction made by the famous French linguist, Ferdinand Saussure, between the “*signifiant*” and the “*signifié*”: the word and what it relates to in the world. But, looking

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\* Fakultät für Geschichtswissenschaft  
Universitätsstr. 150  
D-44780 Bochum  
Gebäude GA 5/32  
Germany

back to the history of linguistics, we find that the relation between language and reality was seen very differently at various times. And it is the way of conceptual history to describe this relation, which makes the difference between traditional realistic and modern conceptual studies of history.

In traditional studies of history, historians were concerned exclusively with what had happened in the past, language (the language of the sources, as much as the language that they used in writing history) was simply a tool to bring past things into the reader's conscience. The role of language in historical research, in those days, may therefore be compared to the use of glasses, which serve to bring the outside world to the eyes of the observer. Historians did not think about what language "did" with reality, and, if they did, they considered language deficient in not naming, or describing, things "properly." In conceptual studies of history, however, there is no reality separate from the tools (words, sentences, pictures, gestures, symbols, etc), which represent real things. There is a lot of discussion among conceptual historians as to how to think of the relation between language and reality. But, before engaging in such discussions, it must be stressed that all conceptual historians agree that language is part of historical reality itself. That means that to study the reality of the past we have to study language, which brings past reality, if not to existence, but to perception—and, consequently, in order to study historical change, we have to study conceptual change, i.e. the change in concepts.

## Historical time and Reality

Is reality something "outside" language, existing on its own, or, does it exist only in language constructed by our use of words? The question goes to the core of conceptual history, which is why it is worthy of discussion. Historians do not deal with reality in general, but with reality in the past, present and future—i.e.: they deal with reality in time. But, what does this mean? As we have learned from the philosophical tradition, time and space are the two dimensions of reality, especially of past reality. To locate an event, a person, or whatever, at a certain point in time and space, is to give them a historical reality. But, how do we know about the existence of something, which is not in the present for us? The answer is: by extending the evidence of our present existence to other times and places.

Understanding past historical time is important in two ways: first, time makes a certain kind of difference between our present self and the object we look at in the past with respect to the future. In saying that something happened "earlier," we declare that it existed, and that it no longer does. In other words, it defines a temporal relation between the object and us. The same is true when we say that something happened "earlier," or "later," than something else. In doing so, we also establish a bond of existence among the past objects themselves. Second, in establishing such a temporal relation, historical time constructs a temporal unit: a common cosmos among all things, which are defined—and, thus, included—in such a way. This we call "history." Since we ourselves are part of this world, we are inclined to concede the same kind of reality to all things in the past (and future) as we do to our own present existence.

But, in explaining historical time in such a way, there is a problem: past things exist only by participating in our own experience. The past is part of our present, as much as our present existence changes, so past things change, too. The way we look to past changes in time depends on our present interests, moral categories and language. But, at the same time, we are convinced that what happened in the past is independent of our knowledge and the way we look at it. That is to say, our way of thinking about the past is ambivalent, and it corresponds to the everyday experience we may learn from the history of philosophy that time itself may be defined in various ways.

In the European tradition, we are used to relying on two concepts of time, one based on the ideas of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, the other on those of the Latin “Church Father” Saint Augustine. Aristotle defined time as the combination of two kinds of movements: one is the circular movement of earth, which defines the basic units of our calendar (days, years etc.) the other, the linear addition of these units to days and years, etc. This is the idea of an “objective” time independent of human beings. Saint Augustine, by contrast, defined time as “extension” of the soul—i.e.: the human observer’s perspective of the past (remembrance), present (awareness) and future (expectation). This is the “subjective” idea of time. The modern concept of history combines both ideas. By establishing a calendar, we count the years of history in the “objective” manner of Aristotle. But, in relying on historical interests, memories and expectations, we follow the “subjective” approach of Saint Augustine.

What is the importance of this for conceptual history? There are three ways to deal with historical time in European historiography: the traditional

way—we speak of the age of historicism—was to eliminate, as much as possible, the subjective construction of time in writing history. Thus, subjective sources of the past, such as letters or autobiographies, had to be examined carefully, through comparison and rational reasoning, in order to establish whether their reports were reliable. Conceptual historians are convinced that this is insufficient, and that there is a reality besides what modern reasoning may arrive at—a sphere of subjective reality. For example, we may learn from our collective memory, historical sources and common experience that the French revolution of 1789 caused tremendous change in modern societies, in political, social and moral terms we are convinced that the revolution was the beginning of a new age in history, the age of revolution, or modernity. But, at the same time, we learn from historical sources that the contemporaries of the revolution believed that they were re-establishing the virtues and lifestyle of Classical Greece and of the glorious Roman Empire. In other words, they attempted to go back in time. For them, therefore, the revolution was a different “reality” from what it is for us.

Historians know very well to distinguish between both kinds of “reality,” but they differ in defining the relations between them: the subjective construction of history by past individuals, and the objective reconstruction of history by our present efforts. Radical constructivists tend to eliminate present reconstructions of the past, as products of our fantasy. They consider the past construction of the world by contemporary actors to be the only reality. Moderate constructivists, on the other hand, are willing to combine both: the subjective construction of history by contemporaries, and the objective reconstruction of history by modern historians.

What does this imply for the idea of historical time? Today, radical

constructivism is very popular in philosophy, social anthropology, sociology of science and the history of literature. However, historiographers do question the radical implications of constructivism. Usually, those who follow the concept of radical constructivism have links to one of the above-mentioned disciplines. A good example for radical constructivism in conceptual history is the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680~1820*, edited by Rolf Reichardt, Eberhard Schmitt, Hans Jürgen Lüsebrink and others. The concept of the *Handbuch* is based on the theory of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who, in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*(1972), argued that what we usually call “reality” is nothing but a system of knowledge. To follow this argument, it does not make sense to reconstruct past reality independent of their contemporary representation.

For ordinary historians, this is hardly acceptable because they are convinced that reconstructing the past is more than collecting contemporary knowledge we know more about the past than contemporary people could know—say, about the consequences of their actions. For example, the results of a war, such as the First, or the Second World War about the interdependence of past events (e.g. the relationship between the exploration of other continents and the rise and fall of early-modern European economies). There are also other things that could not be observed by contemporaries, such as long-term climate changes. This is why moderate constructivists insist on taking into account our modern knowledge about the past, though this does not imply that they accept “reality” naïvely, understanding the world as something given: They may concede that what we call reality is a construction—but a construction over time and space. It is

not difficult to give the idea of (historical) “reality” 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 deal with two different constructions of past reality—without any loss of empirical evidence.

### Present past and Past present

In the early 1960s, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck(1923~2006) was one of the first to define the conceptual difference between the “present past”—i.e.: what present people of today have in mind when speaking of the past—and the “past present”—i.e. what past people had in mind when speaking of their own present time (which, today, is past). This was a very simple conceptual distinction, but it had a tremendous impact on historical studies. Whereas the idea of a “present past” was very conventional when referring to the established practice of historiography, the concept of a “past present” opened a new field for historical research. It was concerned with what people in the past believed to be the case what they believed to be their past and their future the field of past experiences, expectations, recollections, etc. To give an example: in dealing with the time of the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century, we are well aware that times have changed in the meantime. Hence, up to very recent times, European historians would describe the change in time as the progress of modern societies. However, contemporaries were convinced that the end of the world was near. They possibly expected the present status of the world to

last for one or two generations at the utmost. But they would never have thought that the world would have such a long existence, as we have learned. This is why they sought to prepare for Christ's Second Coming and the Last Judgement. However, to know that this has not yet happened, does not help us to understand the aims of the Reformation. We have to understand their own subjective expectations if we are to understand their actions and feelings. Luther, for instance, did not want to establish a new "Protestant" church, but, rather, to renew the existing church in the imminent expectation of the end of the world.

According to Koselleck, however, the knowledge of past societies (i.e.: what they knew, or thought they knew) should always be seen in interference with what we today know about the same time, the same items. In the framework of earlier historiography, the knowledge of the past was usually rejected and condemned as having turned out to be wrong, deceptive, or illusive. Only the present, "scientific" knowledge was accepted as "true" knowledge. For conceptual historians—as for all historians of mentalities—this concept is no longer valid. But, they differ in accepting past mentalities as the "whole" historical reality.

According to Foucault's theory of discourse analysis, only the reconstruction of contemporary knowledge can be accepted as a true description of the past. According to Koselleck's concept of conceptual history, we should accept both: that past knowledge represents the past, and that, in many respects, today, we know more about the past than did contemporaries. It is a contradiction, which can be explained only by telling the story about how the past idea of history changed into the modern idea of history. For the reconstruction of history, the present past is as important as the past present,

which is to say that descriptions of the past refer to two diverging levels of world experience: the structures of contemporary representations, and the structures of present representations of the past, documented and expressed both according to the linguistic concepts of historical sources and in terms of the concepts of modern scientific discourses about the past.

In accordance with this concept, historical narratives adopted the form of a multi-focal approach to the past. In the 1960s this was something completely new. Whereas the analysis of social history (like that of earlier schools of historiography) was based on the idea that the historian had to take facts from sources in the past, whereas basic ideas, concepts and theories were from his own time and imagination, conceptual history proved that this "division of labour" was no longer valid. This is because the sources of the past offer more than facts they also offer ideas, concepts and theories about the world—no less so than our present perception of the world. That is why conceptual history ultimately opened the structural approach of social history to the comparison of two semantic levels: the language of the sources and the language of present-day, scientific analysis and description.

But, how does this work? It is very ambitious to construct a historical narrative capable of dealing with both the sequence of events and with historical, conceptual change. To realize this is difficult because, in describing this change, conceptual historians must, at the same time, deal with the change of concepts, which they use in describing things. To manage this problem, many historians separate them. First, they explain the change of basic concepts to the reader afterwards they describe the change of the "real things." But, this does not work because the same event may be seen and described in different ways, depending on the concepts that we use.

Moreover, the same concept may refer to different historical meanings when used in a different context. It is difficult to manage this mutual interrelation of concepts and historical contexts, but it is worth trying to, since, in practising conceptual history, history becomes self-reflexive: we learn about past reality as much as we do about the changing preconditions for understanding the changing reality of history.

By practicing conceptual history, the historian is involved in the representation of the past, and is no longer a distant observer, sitting in his arm-chair as he reads to his audience about remote events. Rather, he is involved in the practice of writing history—an agent in the process of “doing” history, in using concepts to describe the past. For conceptual history, it is most important that basic historical concepts be seen, and be used, both as tools to change, and as images, or representations, of reality: as “tools” (in the terminology of the “Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe,” as “*factors*”), following the use of concepts in past actions what people “did” by using these concepts in certain situations; as “images” (“*indicators*”), following the meaning or the reference-function of concepts. Both aspects belong together and cannot do without one another. To give an example: the same person may be called a “refugee” or a “displaced person” when expelled from his home country. Both terms may represent the same man. But, to call him a “displaced person” gives him more rights under international law than to call him a “refugee.” Besides signifying a person who had been forced to leave his home country, the invention, after the Second World War, of the term “displaced person,” was a semantic tool for strengthening the rights of many people in the world who had had a very poor lot.

## Discourse analysis or Concept analysis?

In studying conceptual history, a strategic question is which part of language we analyze. It is the problem of linguistic units: should we study the structure and change of words (concepts), or the structure and change of discourses—i.e.: of ways to argue—to describe and discuss things? Today, among historians of conceptual history, two different branches of study are well established and much propagated: they may be called “discourse analysis” and “concept analysis.” In looking at structures and changes in language, one focuses on texts, the other on words one concentrates on systems of argument, which are represented by sentences, the other on ideas and concepts, which are represented by words. In fact, in many respects, the approaches are not as different as they may seem in this distinction. But, for the sake of argument, and in order to discuss their distinguishing features, it may be helpful to hold to this description for the time being. Looking closer at both branches of conceptual history, we have to distinguish again between various schools or “philosophies.”

1. In discourse analysis it was Michel Foucault(1926~1984), who through his book, *L'archéologie du savoir*(1969), did most for the acceptance and popularisation of discourse analysis, first in France and later in the United States and other countries. 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 rein 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. In these terms, he excluded the idea of

historical origin and development as much as he did the idea of hermeneutic translation. For, it was his conviction that discourses cannot be understood through translation into our own time and language, but only through our use of 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 conceptual historians, it seemed extremely difficult to prove the empirical evidence of his description of discourses.

More closely based on empirical evidence is the approach of the so called “Cambridge school,” established by John Pocock(1924~ ) and Quentin Skinner(1940~ ), scholars who follow the analysis of “political languages.” Originating in the old European concern for political philosophy, this kind of discourse analysis is much more limited to its field of study it does not claim, as Foucault’s work does, to represent the knowledge of a certain period of time as a whole, but only of one fraction. That is, it allows the reconstruction of basic ideas and cultural practices of a certain political tradition without caring too much about texts in different spheres of political and social life. Its main concern is the idea of “republicanism,” 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 methodology is the reconstruction of a system of basic concepts, arguments and approaches which are bound together in the term “language.” “Discourse,” in this sense, refers neither to Saussure’s “langage” nor to a single text or speech, but to the common features of texts and speeches of those who are engaged in the same “philosophy” of

republicanism.

2. Looking now at the various types of “*concept analysis*,” one is, once again, confronted with a wide range of theoretical approaches. Some historians take the concept to be an “idea,” supposing that such an idea has its own life and history. In their study, they follow such an idea—for example, “liberty” or “democracy”—through all texts of the past (mainly philosophical ones), in order to argue that the idea developed and changed in the course of time. The basic argument is that the context of a concept may change but the concept itself lives through all of them. This kind of history of ideas (“*Ideengeschichte*”) was very popular in Germany, during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and still persists in many countries. But, it was much opposed by social historians, who argued that only social groups and individuals, not ideas, could be agents in history.

Some other conceptual historians take the concept to be a linguistic unit (word) with a certain meaning, which is defined by its use. The most radical version of this approach is the so-called historical “*lexicométrie*,” elaborated by Saint-Cloud (France). On a strong empirical basis, it defines words by counting their use in certain groups of historical text material. The program is based on the approach of the French school of the “*Annales*,” established by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel. In *lexicométrie*, concepts are not understood as carrying an argument or an idea, but as one part of a sentence. By studying its use in history, however, we may learn about the various meanings of a word and its quantitative extension in contemporary texts, but nothing about the structure of past societies.

## The approach of the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*”

The most suitable way to organize historical studies in concept analysis is to collect them in encyclopaedias. More than a dozen of them have been published in Germany, in the last thirty years. The most important of them are the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*” (8 volumes, 1972~1998), edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck; the “*Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie*,” in its 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Joachim Ritter (13 volumes, 1971~2007) and the so-far unfinished “*Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680~1820*,” edited by Rolf Reichardt and others (1985 ff.). They differ in their idea of a “concept”: Ritter’s “*Historisches Wörterbuch*” is near to the approach of the *Ideengeschichte*, whereas Reichardt’s “Handbuch” presents some features (such as the quantitative approach) of the *lexicométrie*. But, they all agree in taking the concept as representing some kind of discourse. To avoid making things too complicated, I will confine myself to the approach of the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.”

The leading figure of the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*” was Reinhart Koselleck (1923~2006). A Professor in Heidelberg and Bielefeld (Germany), Koselleck elaborated the concept of the lexicon and finished its publication following the deaths of his co-editors, Otto Brunner (1898~1982) and Werner Conze (1910~1986). In his theory of concept history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), he incorporated various theoretical traditions. From the historian Otto Brunner, he learned to take concepts as structures of past societies. From him and his colleague Werner Conze, he adopted the idea of basing conceptual history on social history. From the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, he adopted the

hermeneutic concept of “translation”—the idea that in order to understand historical sources we have to translate them into our own language. From Carl Schmitt, the famous professor of constitutional law, he adopted the concept of political anthropology—that is, the idea that certain concepts “rein” a particular period of time, dominating most of its arguments and giving the basis for what seems to be evident to contemporaries. But Koselleck’s theory is more than a summary of theoretical approaches of other people it is a theoretical concept in its own right.

1. According to Koselleck’s theory of conceptual history, one must distinguish between words and concepts. The meanings of words are defined by the context of their actual usage, as a word may be used in more than one sense, and meanings are collected and separated in dictionaries. A concept, on the other hand, is usually expressed by a word its meaning is not defined by its actual usage, but by a whole branch of usages. To give an example, which already Koselleck used: the concept of “state” in modern societies is defined by many characteristic features: a nation, a constitution, a coherent geographic space, a common culture, history and language, etc. In a given situation, it may refer to some of these features only, but they are all present. The meaning of a concept in a given text or speech is not limited to the given context, but the concept evokes many associations, which cling to the expression without being part of the actual argument. By these means, a concept may be defined as a shortcut for a discourse and compared to the label of a bottle, which signifies what is in the bottle (the discourse).

But a concept may even be part of many discourses—establishing some kind of “link” between them. To give an example, the concept “enlightenment” was, firstly, used in discourses about the weather before it was taken over to refer to



the cultural development, in the sense of the improvement of knowledge and manners in the eighteenth century. Another example is the term “revolution,” used by seventeenth-century astronomers to describe the circular movement of planets. By the end of the eighteenth century, it had been transferred to describe the rapid political and cultural changes in France, which at the beginning users of the term intended as a description of the expected return to the old order. Soon, however, it turned out to stand for just the opposite: the origin of a new social order. Although philosophical purists may argue that these are two different concepts, the concepts cling together one cannot do without the other, and the change of meaning is linked to historical changes in the structure of society.

2. To reconstruct the meaning of a concept, it is necessary to compare many usages. So far, the definition of a concept is comparable to that of a word. But, whereas the dictionary definition of a word is based on the abstraction of the context, the context is included in the definition of a concept: as the context changes, the meaning of a concept also changes. Hence, a simple theory of conceptual history may come to the conclusion that there is a direct historical synchrony between the change of a concept and the change of historical patterns. But this is not true. Linguistic changes follow their own patterns they do not simply depict or reflect social or political changes. To give an example of this, the industrial revolution in England and France goes back to the eighteenth century, but the term “industrial revolution” was invented only in the late 1830s. Things are often older than the terms we use in speaking about them, though, sometimes, they may be younger. For instance, the term “socialism” was invented long before socialism was established in any country.

Having said this, though, looking for semantic changes in the use or definition of concepts is very useful when we analyze changes in the structure of past societies. To give some examples: nobody would argue that there was no state before the invention of the modern concept “state,” or publicity prior to the eighteenth-century invention of the term “publicity.” However, the establishment of these concepts reflected a new level in the organisation of modern states and modern publicity: their establishment represented a comprehensive combination of characteristic features, which had not previously existed. In some cases, historians—no less than contemporaries—were unaware of this new stage in the development of institutions before conceptual history demonstrated the linguistic change. But, as soon as the analogy of linguistic and cultural change is demonstrated, it is possible to use the concept for describing a historical phenomenon. In using conceptual analysis in such a way, we are justified in taking concepts for structures of society.

It may be helpful, to give some further examples: from the late Middle Ages onwards, the term “*natio*” was used to describe groups which shared a language—for instance, French and German students attending Italian universities in the fifteenth century. Then, from the sixteenth century onwards, in politically developed kingdoms such as France and England, the term “nation” began to be used for the people. But, only by the time of the French revolution was the “nation” defined as being the sovereign state. From that point on, therefore, we may speak of the age of “nation-states.” The same is true of many other concepts—to give but one more example: the modern concept of “constitution” is used for a written document which outlines, in a coherent form, the most important laws of a nation-state. The

term “constitution,” however, is much older, and only began to carry this modern meaning in the late eighteenth century when the first modern constitutions were established in Denmark, the United States and France. That is why we speak of the age of modern constitutions.

3. It is not by accident that most basic conceptual changes in Europe occurred in the Enlightenment—i.e.: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—as this was a turning point in the cultural history of Europe, separating the pre-modern world from the modern world. The epistemological importance of this change is even higher than its political and cultural importance because, by that time, the linguistic patterns of our modern language had been established. Koselleck invented a new term for this fundamental cut in historical development: “*Sattelzeit*.” The term, at the same time, indicates an age of fundamental change towards modernity, and an age of understanding this modernity.

The “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*” encyclopaedia was created to explore the mental, social and political tools of this age. It serves three purposes:

- First: to translate the pre-modern to the modern German language. Many pre-modern concepts disappeared, others were invented and some changed their meaning. We need a dictionary in order to understand text material written before the “*Sattelzeit*.”
- Second: to analyse the political and social structures of the modern world. Koselleck discovered basic structures of modern social development, which are implied in the meaning of many modern concepts: “temporalization” (the description of long-term realisation of historical phenomena) “democratization” (the description of growing democratic extension and legitimization) “politization” (the description of growing

reference to the sphere of politics) “ideologization” (the growing loss of empirical evidence).

–Third: to lead historiography to self-reflection. The most important example was Koselleck’s analysis of the concept “history.” When, in the mid-eighteenth century, the old Greek term “*historia*” took on the modern meaning of “history,” in general (and no longer simply the history of some concrete object, such as the history of the Roman empire, or of a certain person, etc), it covered both the actual events and their narrative of them. As Koselleck demonstrated, the modern concept “history,” itself, is, self-reflexive, since it is impossible to refer to the historical facts without referring to the historical narrative, and vice-versa. To extend this knowledge to all concepts is the aim of conceptual history.

## Perspectives

In the last decades, conceptual historians trained in German conceptual history have extended the program of the “*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.” They have analysed not only political and social concepts, but also religious ones (such as “religion,” “confession,” “piety”) developed new analytical strategies and questionnaires (such as the idea of a “household of arguments,” and the systematic search for semantic opposites). Generally speaking, one may observe a growing interest in the question of how concepts “work” in given situations (instead of asking to which objects they relate).

Today, the most important challenge for conceptual historians is how to

deal with the translation, communication and relation of various languages in past, present and future times. We know that translating is much more than the reproduction of meanings in another language. Translation is a way of understanding, but also of accommodation, and acquisition. As we know from our daily experience, there is a lot of influence when concepts, arguments and discourses are translated from one language to another. Therefore, conceptual historians all over the world are currently engaged in inventing and exploring methodologies to determine how concepts are, and should be, translated. To find a clear understanding of the proper ways and problems involving these activities is part of our common responsibility for the future.

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