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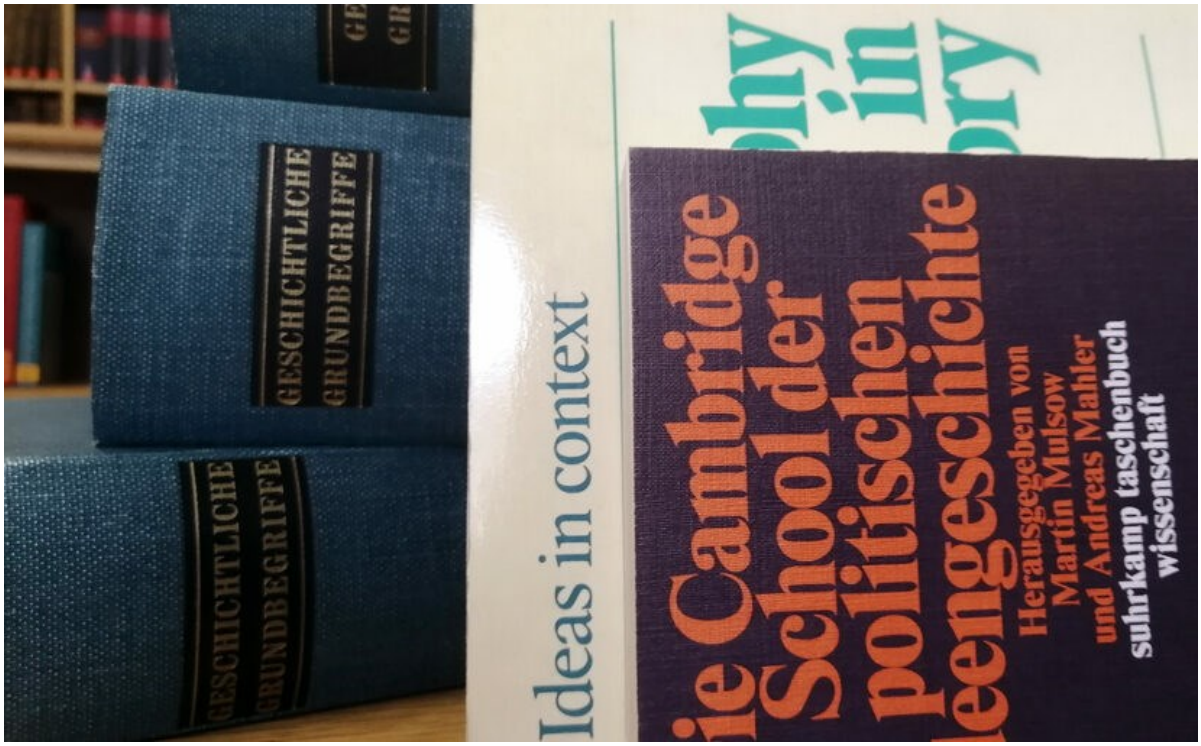

What Is, and To What End Do We Study, Intellectual History?: A Comparison of Two Approaches: The 'Cambridge School' and 'Conceptual History'

From 2–4 June 2022, the German Association for British Studies will host its annual conference under the title of 'From Cambridge to Bielefeld—and Back? British and Continental Approaches to Intellectual History'. Two specific—and local—schools of thought and their respective groups of thinkers are thus at the heart of the conference: *Cambridge*, where intellectual historians in the tradition of J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and John Dunn's more or less shared outlook still apply linguistic and historical methods to modern political thought; and *Bielefeld*, where Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck edited the monumental lexicon on key historical terminology entitled *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*[1] (*GG*), and where Koselleck was involved in shaping the institutional and methodological outlook of the now well-known Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF).[2]

As various commentators have remarked since the end of the twentieth century,[3] the 'Cambridge School' and 'conceptual history' approaches share a number of focal points, and are thus optimal interlocutors for transdisciplinary and transnational discussions on the existing traditions and methodologies for the study of history.

The shared interests of the two schools, and the fitting occasion of the conference, make it worthwhile to reflect on the topical constraints and the thematic field opened by the act of comparing the two approaches. For whereas the

‘Cambridge School’ almost exclusively operates within the field of political theory, the German term *Begriffsgeschichte* denotes a much wider intellectual tradition in its own German context—a tradition that stems from and covers a very wide array of disciplines, including philosophy, theology, literature, and linguistics. It is therefore mainly due to their own academic background in the history of political thought that Cambridge School intellectual historians usually think of Reinhard Koselleck and the *GG* when they refer to German ‘conceptual history’ as a methodological paradigm that is different from, and yet commensurable to, their own.

What, however, is ‘intellectual history’, and what does it mean to refer to a ‘Cambridge School methodology’? Generally, any talk of ‘intellectual history’ can be situated within a nexus of what is still today often referred to as *histoire des idées*, *Kulturgeschichte*, or *Geistesgeschichte*: in the loosest sense possible, the exploration of past bodies of thought. Of course, the big methodological problem for anyone engaged in such a pursuit is how to *write* such a history. Whereas solely cultural, political, or economic histories can be based on artefacts, data, or the attested behaviour of historical agents, the empirical sources for ‘thought’ are not easily discernible. All one normally has at one’s disposal are thinkers and what they said or wrote.

Both ‘Cambridge School’ historians and conceptual historians would agree on this analysis of the predicament, and that is why they both disagree that one could ever write a pure ‘history of ideas’: they would point out that there is no such thing as a ‘free-floating’ idea.[4] Instead, ideas are usually materialized in the written or spoken word—in linguistic utterances, as Skinner liked to put it,[5] or in terms or concepts (*Begriffe*), as the German conceptual historians emphasize.[6] Yet, as historians know, history is always in flux, and concepts and utterances change over time. If one therefore wants to write a history of a certain idea—say, the idea of ‘justice’—the best one can do is to track the changes in the way people have expressed what they considered to be fair, just, or good. ‘Cambridge School’ historians and conceptual historians both do this. Whereas the latter focus on the shifts in meaning and social context that stand behind the use of key terms in modern political discourse, such as ‘natural law’, ‘public’, or ‘parliament’, the former examine the performative function of the words themselves:

> *One direction [of the ‘Cambridge School’], explored particularly by Quentin Skinner, took advantage of work which was being done in linguistic theory in the 1950s and 1960s by John Austin and John Searle . . . [They]argued that the function of words is not limited to saying how things are . . . Rather, beyond simply saying things, words can in specific contexts be used to* do *things. That is, the speaking is or can be a doing . . . and thus . . . we have to recognize both an ‘illocutionary’ dimension and a ‘perlocutionary’ dimension. The ‘illocutionary’ dimension is what a speaker is doing* in *using certain specific words. The ‘perlocutionary’ dimension is what a speaker is doing* through *or* by *using specific words. Thus a perlocutionary act, by definition, surpasses or goes beyond the text. But an illocutionary act, also identified by . . . Skinner with the notion of an author’s* intention *in writing or saying certain words, is contained within the text itself. It is the ‘point’ of the act (text) from the perspective of the author. This kind of intentionality, Skinner postulated, is recoverable in reading.*[7]

If one takes this specific methodological impulse to recover an author’s illocutionary intention behind the perlocutionary role of a written word as constitutive for much of the work that is still being done today in the tradition of the ‘Cambridge School’, then what follows is that

> *a particular piece of language is no longer seen as the* expression *of thought. The old intellectual history as a history of ideas carried the implication that the idea stood independently of the words that expressed it, such that it could have been expressed in different words, another book. It made the relation of the ideas to the language and the book contingent. Intellectual history as a history of language in use instead sees language usage as constitutive of thought: to use words in a particular way within a particular linguistic horizon just* is *to ‘think’. There is no thought behind the words . . .*[8]

It is immediately obvious why this method is of such interest to political theorists in particular: it can elucidate the situatedness and contingency of our own political notions, and can, at best, free us from arguing in specifically transmitted vocabularies. The illocutionary dimension behind our own political theorizing—that is, *what we want to get at* when we argue politically, among other things—can instead be refreshed when we ‘do our own thinking for ourselves’ and critically review our own choice of words.[9] It is this kind of historical awareness that we find, for

example, in Quentin Skinner's analysis of 'republicanism',[10] which is draws inspiration from antiquity and the Renaissance, and yet is conscious of changes in the performative function of the concept.

The sophisticated theoretical underpinning of the 'Cambridge School', however, has led to a complex debate about whether it actually exists as a unified and coherent approach, and has also 'led some of its practitioners to reject an intellectual history not only in the sense of a history of ideas, but even in the sense of a history of concepts, the German *Begriffsgeschichte*.'[11] From the perspective of the 'Cambridge School', the 'conceptual history' approach misunderstands the nature of thought and conception due to its ignorance of Austin's and Searle's linguistic insights:

> *How someone conceives of something is what linguistic connections and moves they make – no more. There is no supra-linguistic 'concept' available in some abstract dimension for the historian's attention.*[12]

I think that this contrast has been over-dramatized. When we read, for instance, Koselleck's entry on 'democracy' in the *GG*,[13] which traces the content of our contemporary standard political conviction through its various historical transformations, we find the same kind of sensitivity to historical and linguistic changes in the meaning and performative role of this word as in Skinner's work on republicanism or liberty.

Instead, one should note the insight shared by both conceptual and 'Cambridge School' history that it is impossible to write an intellectual history of something like 'republicanism' or 'democracy' on the basis of a single term. After all, over time, people change the ways in which they express themselves, and vocabularies also change. A cursory glance at a random article in the conceptual history tradition should dispel the myth that, by providing a history of a 'concept', conceptual historians secretly reintroduce free-floating ideas under the guise of a paralinguistic entity that they can track over time. Instead, it is precisely the transformative nature and the discontinuity of thought that is highlighted by the *Begriffsgeschichte* approach. For example, when one of the first ever conceptual histories of the term 'cosmos' appeared in the newly founded *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, attention was paid not only to one Greek word or one 'idea' of an ordered world, but also to such different conceptions as 'mundus', 'space', 'ordo' or 'Weltraum'.[14] The result was not the etymology of one term, but an understanding of the changes in how people have historically understood the entirety of the world they were living in—at least in the West and, in the overwhelming majority of cases, from a male point of view.

This does not mean that there are no differences between the approaches; but instead of locating them in abstract methodological debates, I would rather point towards concrete differences in their historical focal points. For Koselleck, for example, it was of paramount importance to understand the nature of modernity in the German context, and much of his work is therefore focussed on the period 1750–1850 in particular. Skinner, on the other side, seems to be more interested in the genesis of the normative concepts used in the Western political world, which leads him to focus on the early modern era from 1500–1700.

Another difference, and perhaps a more important one, can, in good Cambridge school fashion, be found by paying closer attention to the illocutionary context of the 'utterances' of German conceptual historians, so as to meet them, slightly ironically, on their own conceptual terms. After all, German conceptual history grows out of an incredibly pluralistic disciplinary background and includes more than just political theory and history. Whereas John Dunn, J. G. A. Pocock, and Quentin Skinner all graduated in history (which is not meant to neglect their much wider expertise!), German thinkers involved in the conceptual history debates—figures as diverse as Reinhart Koselleck, Joachim Ritter, Hans Blumenberg, and Werner Conze—had academic qualifications in several disciplines: history (Conze, Koselleck, Ritter), history of art (Conze), Slavistics (Conze), sociology (Conze, Koselleck), law (Koselleck), German studies (Ritter, Blumenberg), classics (Blumenberg), theology (Ritter, Blumenberg), and, of course, philosophy (Ritter, Koselleck, Blumenberg). Although this dazzling array of disciplines is mainly a by-product of the traditional German academic system,[15] it highlights the extremely wide spectrum of humanities subjects upon which the perspective of 'conceptual history' was supposed to shed light. Whereas 'Cambridge School' intellectual history can mainly be interpreted as an intervention in the historiography of political thought, conceptual history should be seen as driven by wider concerns, and as a many-sided intervention in several disciplines at once. A good example of such an unexpected application of *Begriffsgeschichte* in a non-political context is the case of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, whose work I will present in a second blog post.

1. Otto Brunner, Reinhart Koselleck, and Werner Conze (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–97). [↩]
2. E.g. Koselleck was executive director of the centre in the years 1974–5 and played a leading role in the management of its research from 1968 until 1979. See Ipke Wachsmuth, 'Gedenkrede des Geschäftsführenden Direktors des Zentrums für Interdisziplinäre Forschung der Universität Bielefeld', in Neithard Bulst and Willibald Steinmetz (eds.), *Reinhart Koselleck 1923–2006: Reden zur Gedenkfeier am 24. Mai 2006* (Bielefeld, 2007), 41–3, at 41–2. In various functions, Koselleck was responsible for attracting Norbert Elias to the centre and for institutionalizing the format of the so-called 'working groups', among other things. The centre's research agenda often reflected the methodological impulse of the conceptual

history approach, and this can also be seen in Koselleck's own work; consider e.g. the ZiF's role as an institutional enabler for his work on the French Revolution: Reinhart Koselleck and Rolf Reichardt, *Die Französische Revolution als Bruch des gesellschaftlichen Bewusstseins: Vorlagen und Diskussionen der internationalen Arbeitstagung am Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung der Universität Bielefeld, 28. Mai–1. Juni 1985* (Munich, 1988). [↩]

3. See e.g. Melvin Richter's classic *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 1995), 124–41, or Annabel Brett, 'What is Intellectual History Now?' in David Cannadine (ed.), *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), 113–31, at 116–17. [↩]
4. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts*, 6. [↩]
5. Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8/1 (1969), 3–53, at 37. [↩]
6. Referring to the foundational terms that he analyses in the GG, Koselleck speaks of 'guiding concepts of the historical movement'. Reinhart Koselleck, 'Einleitung', in Brunner, Koselleck and Conze (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. i, pp. xiii–xxviii, at xiii. [↩]
7. Brett, 'What is Intellectual History Now?', 116. [↩]
8. Ibid. 117. [↩]
9. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', 52. [↩]
10. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2014). [↩]
11. Brett, 'What is Intellectual History Now?', 117. [↩]
12. Ibid. [↩]
13. Werner Conze, Christian Meier, Reinhart Koselleck, and Hans Maier, 'Demokratie', in Brunner, Koselleck, and Conze (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, i, 821–99. [↩]
14. See 'Kosmos', special issue of *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 2/1–2 (1958). [↩]
15. Before the so-called 'harmonization of the architecture of the European higher education system', better known as the 'Bologna Process', German universities usually allowed students to be matriculated in several subjects at once, and recognized credits from different disciplines for the awarding of a degree. They thus did not operate with the English-speaking notion of a 'programme' characterized by a set curriculum. [↩]

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