History and Theory 53 (October 2014), 387-405 © Wesleyan University 2014 ISSN: 0018-2656
DOI: 10.1111/hith.10719

THE "THEORETICAL REVOLUTION" IN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: FROM THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL IDEAS TO THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to clarify what distinguishes the so-called new "politico-intellectual history" from the old "history of political ideas." What differentiates the two has not been fully perceived even by some of the authors who initiated this transformation. One fundamental reason for this is that the transformation has not been a consistent process deriving from one single source, but is rather the result of converging developments emanating from three different sources (the Cambridge School, the German school of conceptual history or *Begriffsgeschichte*, and French politico-conceptual history). This article proposes that the development of a new theoretical horizon that effectively leads us beyond the frameworks of the old history of political ideas demands that we overcome the insularity of these traditions and combine their respective contributions. The result of this combination is an approach to politico-intellectual history that is not completely coincident with any of the three schools. What I will call *a history of political languages* entails a specific perspective on the *temporality* of discourses; this involves a view of why the meaning of concepts changes over time, and is the source of the contingency that stains political languages.

Keywords: intellectual history, temporality, historical theory, political languages

> The change that has come over this branch of historiography in the past two decades may be characterized as a movement away from emphasizing "history of thought" (and even, more sharply, "of ideas") toward emphasizing something rather different, for which "history of speech" or "history of discourse," although neither of them is unproblematic or irreproachable, may be the best terminology so far found.
>
> J. G. A. Pocock (*Virtue, Commerce, and History*)

In 1989, J. G. A. Pocock underlined the profound transformation that had occurred in politico-intellectual history.[1] However, the meaning of this "theoretical revolution," as he called it, has not always been properly understood. More often than not, the new theories end up resolving into a merely terminological transformation: the "new intellectual historians" simply cease speaking of "liberal ideas" or "republican ideas" and start speaking of "liberal language" or "republican language," overlooking the core of the transformation that politico-

1. J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1-2.

intellectual history has undergone. This explains the persistence of old types of approaches, proper to the tradition of the "history of ideas."[2] Its most characteristic syndrome is the paradox that the very authors of this transformation ended up replicating in their historical works the same kinds of anachronistic projections and "mythologies" that, in their theoretical works, they themselves denounced as the fundamental methodological perversion of the history of ideas tradition. In any case, the consistency of this phenomenon cannot be attributed to merely a misunderstanding. There must be a more profound explanation for it. Ultimately, it reveals some ambiguities in the very theoretical frameworks that the so-called "new politico-intellectual history" currently displays, and that underlie the hesitating methodologies and contradictory perspectives regarding its object and sense.

In this article I intend to clarify what distinguishes the new "politico-intellectual history" from the old "history of political ideas." As we shall see, a complex and multilayered universe of symbolic reality has opened that hosts diverse levels, of which that of *ideas* (the referential content of discourses) is only the most superficial. This reconfiguration, however, has not been fully developed by any of those schools that currently dominate the discipline. It is, rather, the result of converging developments emanating from three different sources (the Cambridge School, the German school of conceptual history or *Begriffsgeschichte*, and French politico-conceptual history).

A characteristic feature of this conceptual transformation, which is also its fundamental shortcoming, explains the inconsistencies referred to above: the insularity of the various traditions that prevents the combination of their respective contributions and their integration within a common theoretical horizon.[3] Here lies the second goal of this article. It will explore pathways for the fusion of the elaborations of these three schools, and, on this basis, develop a new theoretical framework. As we shall see, this amalgam will open the doors to a view of intellectual history that clearly separates it from the frameworks of the history of ideas, preventing any confusion with it. Lastly, what I will call *a history of political languages* entails a specific perspective on the *temporality* of discourses; this involves a view of why the meaning of concepts changes over time, and is the source of the contingency-historicity that stains discursive formations.[4] Yet, as we will also see, this perspective of temporality does not fully correspond to that

2. A good example of the spontaneous convergence between this form of conceiving of conceptual history and the tradition of the history of ideas is an article by Irmline Veit-Brause, in which, after emphasizing that the distinguishing feature of the history of concepts is its interdisciplinary nature, she cites as an example the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, which actually is the most remarkable realization of the historiographical project propelled by Arthur Lovejoy and his school. See Irmline Veit-Brause, "The Interdisciplinarity of History of Concepts: A Bridge between Disciplines," *History of Concepts Newsletter* 6 (2003), 8-13.

3. A case in point is a meeting in 1990 in Washington, DC. Melvin Richter, its organizer, met with John Pocock and Reinhart Koselleck to discuss their respective perspectives. It soon became clear, however, that there was no possibility for a productive dialogue between them (Pocock, in fact, began his presentation by admitting his ignorance of the basic theoretical postulates of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*).

4. This article focuses on political languages since they are the main concern of the authors that I discuss in it. Some conclusions may be applied to other fields of intellectual history, but this would demand a separate analysis.

of any of the three schools that initiated this transformation. The mutual articulation of their respective contributions will entail, at the same time, the revision of some of the basic tenets on which each of them rests.

HISTORY OF POLITICAL *IDEAS* AND HISTORY OF POLITICAL *CONCEPTS*

We will start by briefly reviewing the contributions made by each of the three schools, then analyze how they can be combined, and conclude with the theoretical consequences of this fusion. This fusion is possible because, despite their deep differences, a common goal fuels their respective elaborations. They all converge on the common enterprise of trying to transcend the surface of the referential contents of texts (*what is said* in them), which was the sole purpose of the history of "ideas," and to thereby gain access to the underlying mechanisms and figurative procedures that produce them (*how it was possible for an author to say what he/she said)*. This allows us to speak about the presence of a common trend in politico-intellectual history that is globally reshaping the discipline despite the differences of the three approaches.

A first point of reference in the process of dislocation of the tradition of the history of *ideas* is the German school of the history of concepts, or *Begriffsgeschichte,* led by Reinhart Koselleck. This school reacted against the older tradition of *Ideensgeschichte*. For Koselleck, the very project of a history of *ideas* is untenable. As noted by one of his teachers, Otto Brunner, there is no common ground between medieval and modern ideas, such as of the State: the two express different concepts and realities.[5] This being so, the very attempt to write the history of any idea like that of the State from ancient times to the present would entail an arbitrary operation, namely, the creation of a fictitious entity founded purely on the basis of a nominal recurrence of a term that does not refer to a common object. That which we now call the "State" might very well have had another name, and given this, the image of apparent continuity thereby dissolves. Ultimately, such a common history is thus merely the result of a linguistic accident.

Actually, the tradition of the history of ideas did not ignore the fact that ideas have shifted their meaning over time.[6] Yet it is true that, to define its object, it had to assume the presence of a conceptual core that remained unchanged behind the transformations in meaning that a given idea historically underwent, a core that identifies it as a single entity throughout the various semantic contexts in which it appeared. As the Nietzschean saying that Koselleck adopted as his motto states, "only that which has no history is definable."[7]

For Koselleck, *Ideensgeshichte*'s failure to come to terms with the radical historicity of discursive formations ultimately has conceptual foundations. Although this tradition does not ignore that ideas change with the contexts of their utterance,

5. Otto Brunner, *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980).

6. For a review of the history of this school in the Anglo-Saxon context, free of retrospective prejudices, see Anthony Grafton, "The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950–2000 and Beyond," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 1 (2006), 1-32, and Donald Kelley, "What is Happening to the History of Ideas?," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51, no. 1 (1990), 3-25.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II §13.

ideas and context are seen as having a merely external link: the eventual appearance or disappearance of an idea in a given context is a circumstance that does not alter its meaning. It could be established independently of circumstance. It is here that the difference established by Koselleck between *ideas* and *concepts* becomes relevant. Only when a term comes to bear different, particular connotations, states Koselleck, does it properly become a *concept*.[8]

The result is that every concept is inevitably plurivocal; it does not refer to any fixed object or set of principles that can be identified, but to its own history. Yet through the play of its meaningful displacements, a concept articulates a semantic web that symbolically connects various historical experiences that become deposited in it as stratigraphic layers constituting an existential fabric. A concept thus makes the diachronic synchronic. It is this capacity of concepts to transpose their specific contexts of utterance, to generate semantic asynchronies, that provides the history of concepts with its specific performance:

> Insofar as concepts . . . are detached from their situational context, and their meanings ordered according to the sequence of time and then ordered with respect to each other, the individual historical analyses of concepts assemble themselves into a history of the concept. Only at this level is historical-philological method superseded, and only here *Begriffsgeschichte* sheds its subordinate relation to social history.[9]

If conceptual history cuts out social history, if it takes on a proper, particular character, it is because only it can provide clues to recreate long-term historical processes. Ultimately, to the extent that concepts serve to meaningfully articulate different historical experiences, they serve as indexes of structural variations. That is, if concepts act retrospectively as marks of historical experience, it is because they are, at the same time, factors for its constitution as such. Concepts provide to social agents the tools for understanding the meaning of their actions, thus transforming their raw experience *(Erfahrung),* the pure perception of facts and events, into lived experience *(Erlebnis)*.[10] In this fashion, they intertwine the various experiences constituting existential units of sense, and thereby work as the pillars for the structural connections in history.

However, the question that this raises is how conceptual *change* can be produced in history. How is it possible that a concept rebels against its own discursive premises (no concept, Koselleck says, "may be so new that it is not virtually constituted in the given language and does not take its meaning from the linguistic context inherited from the past")?[11] It is here that Koselleck appeals to "social history." For him, while conceptual history transcends social history inasmuch as it articulates long-term meaningful networks of living experience, it is at the same time deficient with respect to the latter insofar as the realization of an action always exceeds its mere utterance or symbolic representation. This

8. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993), 84.

9. *Ibid*., 80.

10. "All *historie,"* he says, "is constituted by the oral and written communication among coexisting generations that mutually transmit their respective experiences" (Reinhart Koselleck, "*Sozialgeschichte* und *Begriffsgeschichte*," in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutchland*, ed. W. Sellinand and V. Schieder [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986], 97).

11. *Ibid*., 102.

is meant to explain why a concept, *qua* crystallization of historical experiences, may eventually become transformed, why the living expectations deposited in it may become frustrated, thereby paving the way for the generation of new meanings of that concept. We thus must speak of a double excess in the relationship between conceptual history and social history, between the level of language and the extra-linguistic level—in short, between structures and events.

Yet this answer poses a number of problems of a more general epistemological nature. It implicitly contains a general theory of historical temporality, a given hypothesis regarding the modes of interaction among the various levels of historical reality. As we saw, the attempt to think the historicity of discursive formations leads Koselleck to undermine the opposition between text and context, between the level of language and extra-linguistic reality, in sum, between ideas and realities. For him, historical experience is not a crudely empirical reality, one independent of the ways in which it has been invested with meanings. Concepts are constitutive of historical experience, since there can be no history, properly speaking, that is not meaningful. It follows from this that, according to his own view, there can be no social history that is not, at the same time, conceptual history, since only concepts make events *historical*. In short, within the framework of Koselleck's historical approach, the idea of a "social history" as different from "conceptual history" is simply a terminological contradiction.

That Koselleck felt the need to postulate the presence of a realm of historical reality constituted at the margins of the symbolic webs that, according to Koselleck, constitute this realm as such reveals a fundamental problem in his entire historical theory. The paradox here lies in the fact that, although all of Koselleck's theory rebels against the traditional dichotomy between ideas and realities, which was proper to the tradition of the history of ideas, at the moment he tried to account for conceptual change in history he immediately restored this opposition. In any case, his invocation of "social history" cannot be taken at face value. It is symptomatic of a problem intrinsic to his theory: how to explain change in conceptual history. His answer invokes an entity (systems of actions performed at the margins of the meaningful webs that could mutually articulate these actions) that his theory has been shown to be incoherent. As a matter of fact, his "answer" is only a code name for the problem it is meant to solve, and is a way to avoid addressing it, since his theory offers no possible solution to it. As Hans Blumenberg remarked, the issue of the change in sense horizons necessarily leads us beyond the realm of conceptual history proper. Concepts, he says, already presuppose the given horizon of sense within which they can display themselves, for no history of concepts can provide us with hints to understanding how these very horizons became established and, eventually, reconfigured.[12]

Lastly, if Koselleck must relapse into the traditional antinomies of the history of ideas, it is because, for him, conceptual history still lacks its own historicity; temporality is not an inherent dimension of it, but something that comes to it from beyond it. At this point we must resort to the contributions of the "Cambridge School." In their attempt to depart from the frameworks of the history of ideas, the members of this

12. See Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu Einer Metaphorologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998).

School moved one step further than Koselleck toward undermining the opposition between ideas and realities.[13]

THE *PRAGMATIC TURN* AND THE TEXT-CONTEXT RELATIONSHIP

In its attempt to undermine the antinomies of the history of ideas, the Cambridge School followed a different path from that of Koselleck. The fundamental reformulation it introduced into the discipline consists in incorporating the analysis of a level of language completely ignored by those studies centered on *ideas:* its *performative* dimension. As noted by Pocock:

> The point here is rather that, under pressure from the idealist/materialist dichotomy, we have been giving all our attention to thought as conditioned by social facts outside itself and not enough of our attention to thought as denoting, referring, assuming, alluding, implying, and as performing a variety of functions of which the simplest is that of containing and conveying information.[14]

Quentin Skinner appealed to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of philosophy of language to redefine the notion of text in terms of its performative functions. He would have it approached not merely as a set of statements, but as a *speech act*.[15] According to this perspective, to understand a text historically *qua* a speech act it is not enough to understand the referential content of a statement, but also to place that speech act in the precise system of communicative relations in which it occurred and to unearth its role within this system.

Because of its insistence on the importance of the context within which statements occurred, the Cambridge School came to be identified as advocating a radical contextualism. However, this also gave rise to confusion. The "context" at stake here is *not* a dimension external to the text itself. Rather than *placing* a text in its context of utterance, which implicitly has a view of the two as having a relation of mutual exteriority, what this School seeks is to transcend the opposition between text and context, between "ideas" and "realities."[16] From the very moment that texts are seen as events, as *speech acts*, that distinction becomes meaningless. Even in the case of an utterance that contains wrong statements, its performance still involves a material intervention in a given situation—and it thereby belongs to the order of deeds, not merely of a mental representation of them. In sum, discourses are not factors that come to be added to a reality

13. It should be noted that neither Quentin Skinner nor Pocock used the term "Cambridge School." Other authors usually associated with this School are John Dunn, Stefan Collini, Anthony Pagden, Richard Tuck, James Tully, and Donald Winch. For a comparative study between this school and the German school of history of concepts, see Melvin Richter, "Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," *History and Theory* 29, no. 1 (1990), 38-70, and Kari Palonen, *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe: Das Umschreiben der politischen Begriffe bei Quentin Skinner und Reinhart Koselleck* (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2004).

14. J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.

15. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

16. As Pocock showed, the opposition between "texts" and "context," proper to the history of ideas, placed it into a vicious cycle. "The slogan," says Pocock, "that ideas ought to be studied in their social and political context is, it seems to me, in danger of becoming a shibboleth" (Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time*, 10).

external to them, and that is already fully formed independent of these factors, but instead they are integral parts of that reality. The symbolic penetrates the empirical realm the same way as, conversely, the "historical context" penetrates the discursive level constituting an inherent dimension in it. The main objective of this School is, precisely, to grasp the points of intersection between text and context, to develop the conceptual tools to identify the ways in which the context is introduced into the interior of discourses and comes to be an integral part of them, an intrinsic element that constitutes their very definition, and not merely an external stage for their deployment.

Yet at this point we find an ambiguity in Skinner's use of the idea of "discursive context" as defining the conditions of utterance of a statement: it alludes simultaneously to two different levels of linguistic reality, which Skinner does not clearly differentiate. On the one hand, he uses it to refer to the particular conditions of utterance of a speech, the system of pragmatic relations that underwrites a given communicative exchange. On the other hand, he uses it to refer to the categories that a speaker has available to produce a particular statement, that is, the linguistic field that defines the range of what can be said in each particular situation. The oscillation between these two different meanings of the "context" (the pragmatic context and the semantic context) is symptomatic, in turn, of how Skinner conceives of conceptual dynamics.

In effect, for him, the historicity of discursive formations would be given by the possibility of a break in the relationship between these two levels of linguistic reality; that is, the possibility that utterances are cut out of, and eventually depart from, the frameworks of the established vocabularies in which they are initially nestled. For Skinner, conceptual changes occur to the extent that certain subjects manage to introduce into the available languages new meanings hitherto foreign to them, producing a twist in the vocabulary available to speakers. One of Skinner's standard examples of what he calls "innovators of ideology" is that of the Puritans described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The Puritans managed to impose new ways of describing a capitalist practice that, at that time, was condemned by the predominant religious principles, rendering that practice compatible with these principles. The hitherto despised ambition for wealth would now appear as an example of Christian frugality and probity. The Puritans' "rhetorical achievement," as Skinner calls it, was that they "helped to construct for their descendants a new and more comfortable world."[17] Although it is certainly true that, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has indicated, capitalist practices predated Protestantism, the transvaluation produced by the Puritans conferred upon those practices a legitimacy they formerly lacked, doing so by reinterpreting the terms of their Christian ideology.

Now, although this may explain how the Puritans managed to spread in society and eventually impose upon it new meanings alien to the hitherto established vocabularies (this is what Skinner means by their "rhetorical achievement"), new values that were now in agreement with the predominant ones in their time, it does not yet explain how they managed to imagine these new

17. Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics,* vol. I: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 165.

meanings. At the moment of explaining how linguistic transformations originate, Skinner goes back to a crude "reflection theory": "the rise in a given society of new forms of social behavior will," he says, "generally be reflected in the development of corresponding vocabularies in which the behavior in question will be described and appraised."[18]

Ultimately, this relapse, at the moment of explaining change in intellectual history, into a crude theory of reflection (which today we see as untenable) reveals the fact that Skinner remained attached to a view of political languages as merely sets of ideas. Actually, what he traces is how *ideas* change. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, his *magnum opus*, is precisely the saga of the series of great men who, in a process spanning three centuries, developed novel ideas whose accumulation, according to Skinner, resulted into a new political vocabulary. Yet this view overlooks the obvious fact that every statement always already entails a given grammar that establishes the conditions of its articulation and provides its definite meaning. Thus, the true issue at stake is not how new ideas emerged but how the language on the basis of which these new meanings became eventually conceivable emerged. That Skinner overlooked this point reveals a confusion on his part of two different levels of symbolic reality, of taking ideas for languages, and of thus taking the changes of ideas for changes in underlying languages. This explains K. R. Massingham's remark that "if Skinner had not written this book but was reviewing it, he would probably have dismissed it as yet another example of a work in the history of ideas written in a well-defined but methodologically incorrect tradition."[19]

However, the contradiction between Skinner's historical theory and his practice as a historian, which has been pointed out many times (and which Skinner himself later accepted), is only apparent. The relapse into a more traditional view of change in intellectual history, as we just saw, instead has deep roots in his own historical theory. Far from being at odds with his theory, his historical practice makes manifest the problems and inconsistencies it contains. As we will see, changes in (political) languages are much more complex (and harder to explain) phenomena than he assumes; indeed, they cannot be reduced to changes in ideas nor can they be explained in these terms. This is where the fundamental contribution of French politico-conceptual history lies. A consideration of a new dimension of (political) languages (a third one, besides the semantic and the pragmatic), namely, the *forms* of discourses (their grammar), discloses the complexities hidden behind the traditional approaches of the history of ideas to conceptual change, and that the resort to "social history" or the idea of the "great authors" tends to overlook.

18. *Ibid*., 179.

19. K. R. Massingham, "Skinner is as Skinner does," *Politics* 16 (1981), 128, quoted in Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 66.

THE “FRENCH SCHOOL”: BEYOND THE PHILOSOPHIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Politico-conceptual history in France is actually a vague current. We cannot speak here of a “school.” Yet this label indicates a series of different approaches that nevertheless participate in the general trend to transcend the level of the referential contents of texts and to analyze the discursive conditions of possibility in them. This enterprise would be deployed in France in a different direction from the other two schools discussed above. In particular, authors in France predominantly address their attention to a third dimension of language: the syntactic or formal structure of discourses. Following Saussure’s definition that a language is not a *substance* but a *form*, French political conceptual history came to understand political languages not as sets of statements concerning the state of the world but as *devices* to produce statements.

This redefinition allows us to better explain the difficulties encountered by historians of ideas when they attempt to define political languages (like the liberal, the republican, and so on), without inflicting violence upon their actual historical development. If they do not lend themselves to being reduced to a given set of maxims or principles that could be listed, it is not because they historically change their meaning, as Koselleck stated, but, more simply, because they do not consist of sets of principles or maxims in the first place. Just as one cannot define the English language by listing all that can be said in it, political languages cannot be defined in that way either since they refer to the mode of production of statements. This means that political languages are *semantically indeterminate,* that is, they accept the most diverse and indeed contradictory forms of articulation on the level of the ideological contents of speech (one can say one thing as well as the opposite thing in perfect English, and the same happens with political languages). This means that we need to distinguish between *languages* and *ideas*. What identifies a language cannot be found on the level of ideas or the semantic contents of discourses, but rather on that of the formal procedures by which they are produced, the kind of logic that articulates the given semantic field. In effect, very different and indeed contradictory principles or ideas may nevertheless result from the same conceptual matrix; and, conversely, the same principles and ideas may correspond to very different political languages. Thus, the finding of semantic changes may well lead us to lose sight of the persistence of formal conceptual matrices by which they were produced—and vice versa: the continuities observable on the level of the surface of ideas may eventually hide fundamental rearrangements that occurred on the level of the underlying political languages. Confusing the two (ideas and languages) is necessarily misleading for historical research.

In sum, the focus on political languages leads us to a second-order level of symbolic reality, to the modes of producing concepts; to put it in Jesús Mosterín’s terms, political languages consist of *conceptors* (concepts of concepts).[20] Yet

20. The Spanish epistemologist Jesús Mosterín is a member of the so-called “Berlin Circle,” led by Wolfgang Stegmüller. This group elaborated the so-called “non-statement view” of scientific theories,

at this point we must move one step forward. This "structuralist" orientation was soon displaced by a view of languages that sought to break the opposition between ideas and reality, between text and context, in an even more radical way than that attempted by the Cambridge School. Michel Foucault's notion of "discourse," as elaborated in his *Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), is the best expression of it. As we saw above, from the moment that Skinner introduced the definition of the text as a *speech act*, a material happening, texts no longer appear as mere representations of an external reality, but rather come to be seen as constituting integral parts of that reality, events as "real" as all other types of events. Foucault's notion of discourse shares this assumption but posits it in a different fashion. The notion of discourse translates the focus of intellectual historians from the subjective plane of speech actors to that of the symbolic dimension inherent in practices themselves.

As a matter of fact, every social, economic, or political practice rests on a set of assumptions that are intrinsic to it. Political languages refer to the symbolic dimension inscribed in practices themselves (every political, as well as every social and economic, practice is traversed by conceptual webs that necessarily rest on a number of assumptions). We meet here a crucial aspect differentiating political *languages* from political *ideas*. The former, unlike the latter, are not things that circulate in the brains of humans, subjective representations that could be more or less adjusted to or distorting of reality; rather, they are objective realities that become imposed on speaking and acting subjects beyond their will and even their consciousness. Let me give an example to illustrate the point.

What do we mean when we say that we live in a secular world? Certainly, we do not mean that people no longer believe in God. Actually, most people today do believe in His existence. But this is not the point. Even if a hundred percent of the population currently believed in the existence of God, it would still be true that God is dead, because this phenomenon does not have to do with people's ideas or beliefs but with the changes in conditions for the public articulation of their ideas or beliefs. This is the result of an objective development in the cultural/linguistic world that we moderns inherited and inhabit, something that we cannot change at will; that is, we cannot produce the re-enchantment of the world, as we indeed can change our religious or political ideas by, for example, ceasing to be Christian and becoming Jews or Muslims. We cannot even be fully aware of this secularization process since it provides the basis on which we have the awareness we have (actually, we do not know how political languages have changed in the last two decades even as we can know how our society or economy have changed: political languages do not ask our permission to change).

In sum, a history of political languages leads us beyond the frameworks of the *philosophies of consciousness*, which are at the basis of the history of ideas. It takes us away from the subjective plane, the representations that subjects have of reality, and reorients our focus to the objective plane of actual practices: more precisely, to the symbolic dimension that is built into them, and that is set into motion in the very performance of them.

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which crucially reformulated Kuhn's notion of "paradigm," thus giving a new impulse to epistemological studies. Our view of political languages is partly indebted to the insights of this Circle.

POLITICAL LANGUAGES AND THE PROBLEM OF TEMPORALITY

We can see here more clearly the root of the problems encountered by the Cambridge School at the moment of trying to explain conceptual change. As we said, they result from taking semantic changes of *ideas*, and the accumulation of them, for shifts in political *languages*. This confusion shows that incorporating the performative dimension of language into intellectual history does not suffice by itself to break the traditional view of political languages as sets of ideas. This explains their recurrent relapse into the old framework of the history of ideas. The focus on the *forms* of discourse implies a much more sophisticated way of conceiving conceptual change, as well as the relationship between *language* and *speech*. It is clear that the elaboration of any new definition of a term or concept does not put into question the underlying political languages that constitute its own condition of possibility, nor can it dislocate the discursive apparatus on the basis of which that definition was produced.

This raises the paradox, not at all easy to explain, of how utterances produced within a given political language, the validity of whose logic is therefore presupposed, may eventually twist that logic and make room for the emergence of discursive universes that are alien to it. To put it in Skinner's terms, a *move* by an agent can alter not only the position of the pieces but the very board itself—but how is this possible? To put it in still another way, saying something in correct English according to the rules of formation of statements in that language, yet which dislocates those rules, may force us to revise them; but again, how can speakers accomplish this if they have to presuppose these rules in order to say anything at all? One possible answer to this question, one that is at the basis of the theories of the other two schools mentioned above, is the idea of a transcendental subject that introduces semantic novelties into a given political language from outside it (the postulate of a "view from nowhere").[21] However, the subject here actually works as the name of the problem rather than as an answer to it. This merely translates the problem to a different plane in which the problem sooner or later reemerges: invoking a transcendental subject does explain how such a subject could devise new meanings that did not already presuppose a given grammar, and whose genesis it could not yet explain. Actually, the only way is relapsing into some version of the old-fashioned "theory of reflection."

In effect, every statement always already entails a given grammar that establishes the conditions of its articulation and provides it with its definite meaning. Thus, the true issue at stake, that the invocation to the demiurgic figure of the subject obliterates, is how that language emerged on the basis of which these new meanings eventually became elaborated. In any case, the view that locates the source of conceptual change in an instance placed beyond its field entails a "weak" version regarding the historicity of conceptual formations because it

21. On this topic, see Elías J. Palti, "The 'Return of the Subject' as a Historico-Intellectual Problem," *History and Theory* 43, no. 1 (2004), 57-82.

makes conceptual change extrinsic to a given system. We meet here the most fundamental premise that all three approaches share with the old tradition of the history of ideas, that contingency and temporality are not intrinsic dimensions of intellectual history but things that come to it from outside. Ideas as such are thus implicitly seen as ahistorical entities. The reformulation of these processes of conceptual rupture demands the elaboration of a "stronger" version regarding the temporality of discursive formations, positing a kind of historicity inherent in intellectual history that is not merely derivative of "social history" or the result of the action of supposedly superior individuals. Only this would allow us to clearly distinguish political languages from sets of ideas.

The fundamental difference between these two versions of the temporality of discourses (the "weak" and the "strong") can be more clearly observed in connection with the debate around the thesis of the "essential contestability of concepts."[22] Recently, Terence Ball has discussed the thesis that affirms that the meaning of the main concepts of ethical, political, or scientific discourses cannot be established once and forever, that "there are not, and there cannot be, common shared criteria to decide on the meaning of 'art' in aesthetics or 'democracy' or 'equality' in politics."[23] According to him, if the meaning of these concepts cannot be established in an objective manner, political debate would be impossible, since each person could think of them however he or she liked, without any means of reaching a rational agreement. Yet a holder of the view of the essential contestability of concepts could argue the opposite in a similarly consistent fashion, that it is because these concepts are contestable that we have arguments about their meaning.

A representative of this opposite view is Pierre Rosanvallon. According to him, it is not the impossibility of fixing the meaning of fundamental political concepts that renders politics impossible, but rather the other way around. If the meaning of political concepts could be established in an objective manner, politics would *ipso facto* lose sense. In such a case, the resolution of public affairs should be trusted to experts; there would be no room for differences of opinion, but only those who *know* the "true" definitions of those concepts, and those who *ignore* them.

Ultimately, both views are right. We can say that, without a Truth, political debate is impossible; but, with a Truth, it becomes pointless. Political debate thus at once presupposes and excludes the possibility of fixing the meaning of political concepts. It is the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of defining concepts that opens the field of politics, that makes concepts *political* concepts.

We thus get a different view regarding the issue raised by Koselleck in connection with the undefinability of political concepts. According to Rosanvallon, if they cannot be defined at all, it is not because they change but because they have no positive content, since they are rather *indexes of problems*. The modern concept of democracy, for example, is not definable because it has no object;

22. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 157-191.

23. Terence Ball, "Confessions of a Conceptual Historian," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 6 (2002), 21.

rather, it is simply the name put to a problem, the fundamental paradox of modern politics: how the subject can be at once the sovereign, and the other way around. As a matter of fact, if there is a sovereign there must be a subject; that the same person, the citizen, is both things at the same time is not a principle, but a mark of the fundamental aporia upon which, and against which, modern political discourse is erected. Hence this concept has no definition that can be established once and forever. This implies, in turn, a radically different view of temporality in intellectual history, of the source of the historicity of concepts.

In the "weak" version, the undefinability of concepts is still associated with factors of a strictly empirical nature. It indicates a factual condition, a circumstantial happening. Nothing prevents these concepts, in principle, from stabilizing their semantic content. From this perspective, if nobody had questioned the meaning of a given political category, it could have remained eternally immutable. Concepts certainly change, but there is nothing intrinsic in them allowing us to understand why this is so, why their established definitions eventually become unstable and finally collapse. Historicity is here fundamentally contingent. Concepts certainly change over time, but historicity is not a constitutive dimension of them. To put it in Ball's terms, even if they are always contested this does not mean that they are *essentially* contestable.

The development of a stronger perspective regarding the temporality of concepts implies the relocation of the source of change, moving it from the "external context" to the bosom of intellectual history itself. Thus conceived, political contention changes its nature: the fact that political concepts cannot fix their meaning is not a merely empirical circumstance, the result of contingent choices of political actors, but their defining feature as *political* concepts. This implies that, even in the improbable—and, in the long run, plainly impossible—case that the meaning of a given concept did not mutate, that it was never contested, it would always remain inherently contestable. That is, no political discourse can ever fix its content and constitute itself as a self-integrated, rationally and logically articulated system. We find here a different interpretation of Nietzsche's maxim: it is not that concepts cannot be defined in a definite manner because they change, but the other way around: they change their meaning because they cannot be defined in a definite manner. Only this may render meaningful the debates produced in history regarding these concepts: if there were a "true" definition of them, the fact that people debated their meaning would be attributed merely to a deficient comprehension of their true definition, and intellectual history would be reduced to merely *a regrettable chain of misunderstandings*. The point, in Rosanvallon's words, is "not to try to solve the enigma [of the modern political regime of government] by imposing on it a normativity, as if a pure science of language or law could show men the rational solution to which they must adjust themselves," but rather to consider "its problematic nature . . . in order to understand its concrete functioning."[24] In sum, if political concepts eventually are rendered problematic and become matters of controversy, this is not due merely to a misunderstanding

24. Pierre Rosanvallon, *Pour une historie conceptuelle du polítique* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 26-27.

but due to the fact they, in effect, are *always* problematic (and this is what makes them undefinable).

FROM THE HISTORY OF *POLITICAL IDEAS* TO THE HISTORY OF *POLITICAL LANGUAGES*

We can now synthesize what we have presented so far. As noted at the beginning of the article, this new perspective on intellectual history, which we defined as a transition from a history of *political ideas* to a history of *political languages,* is not a direct outcome of any of the schools that dominate the discipline, but it indeed results from the converging redefinitions that, in combination, radically reconfigured the terrain of the discipline. We can say, schematically, that they have helped to reshape our perspectives in each of the different dimensions inherent in any public use of language. Whereas the German school of *Begriffsgeschichte*, by raising the problem of the undefinability of concepts, dislocated the basic tenet of the history of ideas on the semantic level of discourse, the Cambridge School introduced the consideration of a different level of language: the pragmatic or performative (the system of effective communicative relations in which speech can be publicly articulated). Finally, the French school of political-conceptual history reoriented attention to the formal level of discourses: the rules of their construction (the syntactic level of language). The combination of their respective contributions creates a wholly new view regarding the analytical object of the discipline of intellectual history, which is no longer to focus on ideas and to conceive them as a subjective system of mental representations of reality that is separate from this latter, but instead to focus on languages in which concept and reality are inherently connected. This new object implies, in turn, a new way of conceiving of the historicity of intellectual formations, namely, to see contingency as intrinsic to them.

Actually, the topic of the temporality of discourses entails a more fundamental investigation: what a political language is, how to identify it, and how it differs from an ideological system. Although we cannot exhaust in this article all aspects involved here, in these final pages I want to briefly underline the fundamental features that identify political languages and that distinguish them from systems of ideas.

Political languages are not mere sets of ideas or concepts. This explains historians' repeated corroboration of how stubbornly political languages challenge their definition and the practical impossibility of establishing their contents in unequivocal terms. One fundamental reason is that political languages actually do not consist of *statements* (contents of discourse), which could be listed, but of a characteristic *form* of producing them. Hence they cannot be defined by their ideological contents since they are *semantically undetermined* (as we intuitively know, in any given language, we can affirm something and also its opposite). Ultimately, political languages send us back to a second-order level of symbolic reality, the modes of the production of concepts.

We thus get a first formulation of what distinguishes a history of political languages from a history of ideas:

> *Formulation 1*: To make a history of political languages we need to transcend the surface of discourse, the level of its semantic contents (the "ideas" contained in them), and penetrate the argumentative apparatus that underlies it, that is, the particular ways or formal principles of their articulation.

This formulation permits us to distinguish the contents of discourse (ideas) from underlying political languages. The former refers to the semantic level, the latter to the syntactic one, the formal devices or modes of production of discourses. From this perspective, speaking of a "liberal language" makes no sense if we understand it in strictly ideological terms: one can be liberal (or conservative) in many different manners. Indeed, the same political statements can eventually respond to very different conceptual matrixes; and, conversely, in one and the same vocabulary we can formulate very different and even opposite political programs. Continuities on the surface level of ideas can thus hide discontinuities in their underlying political languages, and the other way around.

This leads us to our second point. Political languages actually cross the entire ideological spectrum. They articulate "discourse networks," making the public discussion of ideas among the actors possible. This implies an even more radical reversal of traditional approaches to intellectual history. When intellectual history is conceived as the history of ideas, historians of these ideas normally seek to establish the fundamental concepts defining each particular current of thought and then horizontally trace their evolution over time. But if intellectual history is conceived as unearthing political languages, the old approach won't do because political languages cannot be discovered except by vertically cutting through the entire ideological spectrum. The different currents of thought now become relevant only insofar as, in their mutual interaction, they reveal the set of shared premises on which the public discourse of an epoch hinged, and how these premises shifted over time. We thus get a second formulation of the difference between history of ideas and history of political language:

> *Formulation 2*: To make a history of political languages we must recreate *contexts of debate*. What matters here is not merely observing how individual political actors changed their ideas, but how the system of their relative positions was eventually rearticulated, resulting in the reconfiguration of the very field for their contention. This system is revealed only in the mutual opposition among contending views.

This formulation moves us from the subjective to the objective realms, from ideas to the conditions for public utterance. Yet recreating *contexts of debate* does not imply moving beyond the level of discourses. Political languages transcend the opposition between "text" and "context" in which the history of ideas was locked. A political language becomes such only insofar as it includes within it the conditions of its own enunciation. This leads us, again, beyond the semantic realm, which was the sole object of the history of ideas. This time, we must add to it the consideration of the *pragmatic* dimension of discourses (*who* speaks, to

whom he/she speaks, *in which* social context—power relations—he/she speaks; these are quintessentially *rhetorical* questions that define the positionality of discourses, the so-called "circumstances"),[25] that is, we must try to find the ways in which the "external context" is inscribed within the ambit of discourses, becoming an integral part of them. This leads to a third formulation of the difference between history of ideas and history of political language:

> *Formulation 3*: To make a history of political languages we must reconstruct contexts of debate, and this can be achieved not by moving beyond the linguistic medium *but only by recovering the linguistic traces of the context of utterance present in the discourses themselves.*

Basically, these first three formulations are aimed at overcoming the insufficiencies of the history of ideas, revealing them to be a result of a crude view of language that reduces it to its merely semantic aspects. Instead, the new political intellectual history addresses its attention simultaneously to the three linguistic dimensions: the semantic, the syntactic, and the pragmatic. The result is the dislocation of the fundamental premise that underlies the whole tradition of history of ideas: the philosophies of consciousness. Why? Because political languages, unlike ideas, are not subjective states, but objective entities. They refer to the set of assumptions implicit in every political practice, since they are constitutive of it. They are always present in it, in an immediate, nonreflected fashion, and are set into motion in the very exercise of that practice.

An expression by a member of the 1790 French Assembly, Loménie de Brienne, illustrates this. In *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville quotes him as revealing the nature of the historical rupture then produced. The French deputy asserted that, from the very moment that the Constitution of the nation became a matter of debate, the Old Regime had already fallen to pieces. What Loménie de Brienne, and Tocqueville after him, were trying to underline was that no matter who had won the election, and indeed even though the absolutist party did win, this did not change the fact that, from the very moment that the Constitution of the nation had become a matter of debate, the Old Regime had collapsed.

We can see here condensed all that a history of political languages is about. What matter here are not the ideas of the subjects, but rather the deep assumptions that constitute the language in which these ideas are articulated. In 1790, Frenchmen probably believed much as they did in 1788. Yet in the intervening years everything changed in the realm of political-intellectual history. The problem is that the history of ideas is radically incapable of grasping what changed during this period for the very reason that these changes cannot be observed on that level—they do not refer to the plane of subjective ideas but to the objective conditions of their public utterance. That is, what shifted, as Loménie de Brienne's

25. The systematization of *circumstances* was one of the main achievements of medieval rhetorical treatises. They took from Cicero and the classics and defined a given set of relationships among the factors of a discourse's *circumstances* and referred to them by means of specific questions: *quis* (who), *quid* (what), *cur* (why), *ubi*, (where), *quando* (when), *quemadmodum* (how), and *quibusadminiculs* (in which way).

expression shows, were the very questions with which the subjects suddenly became confronted, the kind of issues at stake.

And here we get to the crucial point. Changes in political languages express reconfigurations at the foundation of underlying problems that at a given moment agitate political debate, and thus the kind of issues at stake no matter whether subjects are aware of these changes or not. In any case, political subjects cannot escape them since they are not matters of belief; they express objective, cultural developments that occurred in an actual reality (and not merely in the brains of the subjects). We thus get a new formulation of what distinguishes the history of political language from the history of ideas:

> *Formulation 4*: What a history of political languages pursues is not to understand the ideas of the subjects, but to recreate the symbolic dimension inherent in the system of actions themselves, the foundation of the underlying problems with which the actors found themselves confronted, and how this system eventually became reconfigured.

Finally, there is still a further aspect that distinguishes a history of political languages from a history of political ideas: this is the nature of the temporality of discourse formations. The former, unlike the latter, regards these formations as fully historical entities, as thoroughly contingent symbolic formations. This inherent historicity must be interpreted in a double sense.

First, because political languages are founded on historically articulated premises, they cannot be projected in time beyond the horizon within which these premises remain effective. This determines a *principle of temporal irreversibility* that is intrinsic to them (and not merely something that comes to them from without, namely, the external context of their application). This principle unfolds simultaneously in two directions, forward and backward: forward in Skinner's "mythology of the prolepsis" (the search for the retrospective significance of a work, an intellectual procedure that presupposes the presence of a kind of *telos* implicit in it and that becomes revealed only in the course of time; backward in what we can call the "mythology of the retrolepsis" (thinking that we can bring old languages back to life, that we can plainly recover past languages when the premises and underlying assumptions on which they were based has definitively collapsed). As Koselleck showed in relation to the *Sattelzeit*, having surpassed a given threshold of historicity, a plain return to the past is no longer possible. This explains why, for example, to speak in the present of a classical republican language (which, actually, was undetachable from theocentric worldviews) is plainly anachronistic. This leads to a new formulation that brings out the difference between history of ideas and the history of political language:

> *Formulation 5*: To make a history of political languages we must identify those thresholds that determine their inner historicity, those instances that provide languages an immanent principle of temporal irreversibility, rendering impossible either prospective or retrospective projections.

The second aspect that makes political languages essentially historical formations, thus distinguishing them from all "systems of ideas," leads us to what we

can call the *principle of constitutive incompleteness* of modern political languages. They, unlike "ideal types," are never logically integrated and self-consistent entities. What lies at their center is the void left by the dislocation of ancient cosmologies.[26] That is why no modern political category is able to establish its meaning; all of them can eventually be "contested." Actually, semantic changes (new definitions of concepts) cannot by themselves destabilize a given form of political discourse unless they make manifest its inherent blindspots, the meaningful void lying at its center. This radically reframes the task for intellectual historians: recreating a political language thus entails tracing not only how the meaning of concepts has changed over time, but also, and fundamentally, *what prevents them from achieving their semantic completion*. We arrive here at the last formulation regarding the distinction between a history of political languages and a history of political ideas:

> *Formulation 6*: To make a history of political languages we need to observe how temporality arises in political thinking, how precise historical circumstances make manifest the aporias that are intrinsic to a given type of discourse and, eventually, dislocate it.

If we combine the six formulations, we obtain a brief definition of what distinguishes a history of political languages from a history of political ideas:

> *Summary Formulation*: To make a history of political languages, we need to transcend the textual surface of discourses and to penetrate the argumentative apparatus that underlies each form of political language (formulation 1), trying to recreate *contexts of debate* (formulation 2) by tracing within discourses the linguistic vestiges of the context of their enunciation (formulation 3). In this way, we can understand not merely the ideas of the subjects, but also, and fundamentally, we can recreate the system of implicit assumptions built into the very exercise of political practices (formulation 4). This should thus allow us to identify those thresholds that determine their inner historicity, those instances that provide languages an immanent principle of temporal irreversibility, rendering impossible any forward or backward projection (formulation 5). Yet to comprehend political languages as fully historical entities, we should not only identify the particular set of implicit premises and assumptions on which each one rested, and how they changed over time, but also, and fundamentally, we should identify the blind spots that were intrinsic to them, the aporias contained in a given type of discourse that turned concepts into *political* concepts, and, eventually, how precise historical circumstances made them manifest, dislocating that discourse (formulation 6).

Ultimately, this definition seeks to capture the object behind the profound, albeit mostly unnoticed, theoretical revolution that, as Pocock remarked, our discipline underwent in the course of recent decades and that is radically recon-

26. See Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit: Erneuerte Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

figuring its analytical object as well as the ways of approaching it. It helps us to understand the extent to which recent theoretical developments in the field of intellectual history mean a radical rupture with respect to the old tradition of the history of political ideas.

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