

Global Spaces/Global Times: Reconsidering the History of Political Concepts

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In one of the most important essays contained in *Vergangene Zukunft* [= VZ],¹ “Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit”, Reinhart Koselleck posits, from an angle that I am interested in assuming as a starting point for the observations that will follow, the complex relationship that ties objectivity and stance in the definition of the science of history.² Any historical knowledge is conditioned by its standpoint and hence, so to speak, relative. Only such a situated and, at least apparently, relative knowledge is what allows us to critically handle history and to make, therefore, truthful allegations about it.

It took centuries for such a development to be possible. In ancient historiography, the dominant metaphor to state the reliability of a story is that of “bare truth” and its immediate assumption in the discourse that relates it. Letting the truth of a story speak by itself is the ideal the historian points at. In order to do this – and it is a task of minimization that historicism will take on as a methodological premise when Leopold von Ranke will claim the possibility and the necessity to show

1 See Reinhart Koselleck. *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1979. The author warmly thanks Lorenzo Rustighi.

2 See Reinhart Koselleck. “Perspective and Temporality: A Contribution to the Historiographical Exposure of the Historical World”, in *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 128-151.

“how things really went”³ –, it is essential for the historian to give up any possible stance. In order to call himself a historian, he must be, like Lucian of Samosata, “a stranger” [*xénos*] with respect to his own work, “without a homeland, autonomous and not subject to any sovereign” [*apolis, autónomos, abasíleutos*].⁴ This ideal of objectivity – i.e. the historian as a pure mirror of the events he recounts – persists for a long time in the reflection about history and only in the modern age it surrenders to the consciousness of its impossibility.

It is Johann Martin Chladenius (1710-1759), whose *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Koselleck will repeatedly define unsurpassed as to the matter at issue, who marks the point of no return with respect to the postulate of the historian’s abstention from judgment or political neutrality. For Chladenius, history can only be established prospectively. Of course, he still walks the path of vision. *Histor*, in Greek, is after all the eyewitness. Yet here history, even in the primary sources in which it is stored, is immediately conditioned by the particular “Sehepunkt” that retells it.⁵ The same facts may be differently represented depending on the viewer’s point of view, which Chladenius assumes to be inevitably situated in moral, social and material terms.⁶ “Der Sehepunkt”, as Chladenius defines it, although he conventionally acknowledges the relationship between the present and those who experience and witness it as a constitutive one, “ist der innerliche und äußerliche Zustand eines Zuschauer, in so ferne daraus eine gewisse und besondere Art, die vorkommende Dinge anzuschauen und zu betrachten”.⁷ A story as such can only be conceived of as being free from contradictions, but every account of this story will be determined by – which means refracted, reflected, subdivided into – the particular prospect that attests to it from a specific point of view, of which it is permitted to sketch a provisional classification. It becomes an inescapable presupposition for the scientist of history to take it for granted that the “fact”, in which a “Sehepunkt” is objectified, is told by an “interested” person or by a “stranger”, by a “friend” or by an “enemy”, by a “learned” or by an “illiterate”, by a “bourgeois” or by a “peasant”, by a “melancholic” or by a “joyful”, by someone “who is above” or by someone “who is below”, by “a rebellious” or by “loyal subject”.⁸

3 Leopold von Ranke. *Geschichten der römischen und germanischen Völker*. Leipzig, Duncker & Humblot, 1885, p. VII.

4 Lucian of Samosata. *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit*. Oxonii, 1776, XLI, p. 55.

5 Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft, worinnen der Grund zu einer neuen Einsicht in aller Arten der Gelahrheit gelegt wird*. Leipzig, 1752, II, § 17.

6 See Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft...*, V, § 11.

7 Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft...*, V, § 12.

8 See Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft...*, V, §§ 17-23.

Chladenius draws two conclusions from this framework. The first one is that patently any intuitive judgment can only be dealt with as unilateral and relative. “Ein Zuschauer erlangt keine vollständiger Geschichte”, he writes.⁹ There can be different accounts of the same story, each of them claiming to be true. The second, which derives from the same analysis that “subjectivates” the standpoints of the evidences assumed as historiographic sources, is that historiography itself, as far as it is the representation that subsumes and uses them, cannot be said to be but perspectival (VZ: 185–186). The original image of a story (“Urbild”) is transformed and altered (“geändert werde”) throughout its conversion into “Erzählung”, into the tale which repeats it.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the fabrication of perspectivism – Koselleck ascribes this, even before Chladenius, in whose work it is a principle of the method, to the metaphor of the historical telescope used by Comenius – is not limited to such a twofold premise, which turns the source into a situated testimony and the narrative into a representation resulting from a point of view. Here is an authentic “Akt der Befreiung” for the historian, who finally gains the position that allows him to freely “build up” history by making connections, by changing the start- or end-point of a story, or by drawing interpretive hypotheses from the specific valorization of certain elements highlighted by the sources, rather than others (VZ: 187). Much more radically, however, this same perspectivism functions as a principle of temporalization of history itself. If, by means of it, it is possible to assume the spatial relativity of the standpoints and to push this assumption up to the position occupied by the historian, who thus emancipates himself from the impossible commitment to the neutral statement of facts, it is also possible to fluidify chronology and to achieve a specific quality of duration. The storytelling retrospectively affects the past and allows it to be seen in a new way.

In the theoretical debate that took place in mid-18th century Germany – Gatterer, Schlözer, Büsch, among others and, in any case, beside Chladenius – this approach acquires a quite decisive relevance. It allows to deconstruct the position held by direct testimony with respect to an idea of chronology according to which history, always contemporary to the source that relates it, gradually builds up its accumulation. Instead, it is now the prospectively farther “Sehepunkt” that proves able to filter events by judging their relevance depending on the problems or priorities that place it in the most recent point in history, while at the same time opening its depths. The keynote of historiography is no longer the

9 Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft...*, V, § 26.

10 See Johann Martin Chladenius. *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft...*, V, § 12.

vanished present, whose veracity is guaranteed by the direct testimony, but a past thoroughly temporalized by the present that constructs it and represents it as its own antecedent. Historical science investigates the past the same way it becomes aware of its own temporal placement (VZ: 191-192).

There are two more significant consequences here. The first one marks out the modern solution to the paradox we started from, where truth-telling and taking a stance seemed to be contradictory. Truth and prospect, in fact, are in no way separable. This awareness grows in the context of the reflection on the science of history in the second half of the Eighteenth century, far before Nietzsche. The second consequence is equally decisive and is determined in particular by the sudden acceleration of individual and collective experience brought about by the French Revolution. The “Sehepunkt” is itself mobile in the framework of an irreducible temporalization of the spaces of experience. The prospect that historicizes history by choosing the point of view that can instruct and critically evaluate, it in the light of what progress only makes available (knowledge, skills, technicalities unavailable in the past), must in turn submit to reflection, since the point of view changes contextually all along the historical movement. Not only does the present overtake the past (and thus the very past present of the sources), but the present itself will soon be overcome by the future that turns it into the past. The vortex of temporalization overwhelms history and radically resemantizes its concept, its content and its practices.

Hence, the last step I am interested in. Along with such a radical temporalization of history, a few other decisive consequences follow. The first one concerns the problem of judgment. If 18th-century historiography already builds up its own perspectivism, as an effect of the observer's irrevocable stance, the present of the French Revolution, around which revolves the most drastic break between past and future, now compels, as a further supplement, to take sides. The past, as well as the transformation of the present into the past, on the one hand, and into the future, on the other, demands that the historian justify his own position within a single line of temporality that subsumes all possible stories. The Revolution marks the threshold that aligns in a single set individual or collective experiences that may then be judged as progressive, regressive or reactionary with respect to one and the same process.

In German, the singular “Geschichte”, history in itself, wipes out the parataxis of the histories that had for centuries corroborated the motto “*historia magistra vitae*”, along with the idea of repeatability of experience that had validated its consistency (“*Historia magistra vitae. Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont der neuzeitlich bewegter*

Geschichte”, VZ: 37-66).¹¹ Now, when it comes to history, it is all about a unique development related to modernity understood as a project. Even the facts, which are unreachable in objective terms, are from now on inevitably conditioned by judgment. The historical question to be answered is, as exemplified by Koselleck through Friedrich von Gentz’s words, if Louis XVI was murdered (as it is the case for reactionary historiography), executed (as in revolutionary historiography), or punished (as for liberal historiography); not the “fact” that a guillotine of a certain weight detached his head from the trunk (VZ: 203). Louis must be judged by History and by the historian, for whom there is no possible shelter: his story must judge, since it is only by (re)building the sense of that affair that he can redeem the meaninglessness of the empty flow of time and accomplish his own ministry. An event exists only when it converges with its scientific representation and the story as a set of actions resolves itself into its own knowledge. This is the landing place of the path imposed by the modern science of history.

We now have all the elements that are necessary to move further. The difficult balance that the science of history has to preserve, once assumed as unescapable the premise that historically establishes it as a form of knowledge, is between the discourse that lays down in the sources (lexicon, categories, concepts) and the interpretation that approaches it. For Koselleck, a story is never identical to the sources that document it. And this is obvious, since otherwise every single source would already be the story that we want to know. This is a problem Koselleck states on several occasions, for example against Otto Brunner, by highlighting the necessity to get out of the naivest of historicisms. A story is never identical to the sources that document it because, though exercising a “*Vetorecht*” against the historian who mobilizes them (VZ: 206), which means defining the limit that the interpretation cannot overcome, yet, in order to be organized and tell their story, the sources a theory which makes them speak.

We are dealing with a vigorous *anticipation*. Historical knowledge, and that is what we have learned from the development leading to the foundation of the science of history, is always about something more than what we find in the sources. Not only are our problems transforming something into a source, but every source rallied by interpretation points back to something different – something more or something less – with respect to the source considered in itself (VZ: 204). The practice of historiography needs theory. Only the hypotheses that the historian

11 See Reinhart Koselleck. “Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process”, in *Future Past...*, pp. 26-42.

anticipates build up the documentary series that allow us, without forcing them, and, indeed, respecting their specificity, to incorporate the sources into the discourse of history.

A source can never tell us what we should say. However, it will always prevent us from making statements that it is not legitimate to do. The sources exercise their veto-power by making it impossible to venture interpretations that prove to be unreliable with respect to them. Koselleck recovers here the balance between the “truth” of the sources and perspectivism: stance and objectivity intertwine in the field of tension formed by both the process of exegesis of the sources, to which we shall return right away, and the process of construction of theory. This is the only way the apparent paradox we started from can find a solution (VZ: 207).

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The reflection that Koselleck develops with reference to the “Begriffsgeschichte” – a lexicographic practice whose inauguration dates back to the 19th century – can only be understood if we take on what we have just come up with. A history of political and juridical concepts can only be written from the point of view of a theory that posits the problem of the “the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new”, that is, by assuming the decisive fracture between the past and the future produced by a philosophy of history which opens up the gap between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation”. Through what Koselleck calls the “Sattelzeit”, that is, the temporal threshold between mid-18th and mid-19th century, the historical process accelerates towards the future, the only possible thing to say about it being that it will be by all means different from the past. This same future, which acts as a whirlpool with respect to individual and collective experience, forces us to take a stance in order to give sense to the present that anticipates it.

This leads to a radical resemantization of traditional political and social concepts. Concepts that had hitherto expressed and retained a certain content, undergo a quadruple process of *democratization* (since they are used in contexts that are no longer exclusive to the academic debate), *ideologization* (they convey opposing political projects), *politicization* (they determine processes of conflictual identification), and *temporalization* (they are modulated as vectors of different ideas of the future), which provides them with a semantic value irreducible to that expressed previously, when, between the antiquity and the Middle Ages, the dominant experience was that of repeatability of time. Studying the

history of concepts means for Koselleck to be able to take on a privileged perspective in order to describe the process of emergence of the contemporary age and thereby to valorize historical sources according to a criterion of significance that encodes them as integrated in the project of emergence of the world we belong to – although we will see that this hypothesis is somewhat problematic (“Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte”, *VZ*: 107-129).¹²

Koselleck’s model, especially thanks to the applications testified by the *Lexikon der geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, has become the reference for conceptual history in several countries and in different linguistic areas, both European and non-European. In particular, the attempt to create a synthesis between social history, constitutional history and intellectual history has been appreciated for its evident potential for innovation with respect to the history of ideas (which, even in its most accredited international models, uncritically assumes the semantic scaffolding as uniquely defined in its content and as a permanent substrate throughout its modifications) or legal history (which usually does not contextualize its own categories and tends to reproduce them in the continuity of the history of institutions).¹³

For Koselleck, political and social concepts, considered as *indicators*, as concrete *factors* of historical development, have no history in themselves. Yet they contain history. This further assumption, which is decisive in order to reconstruct the different experiences of time stratified in the apparently univocal significance of a concept, is what allows Koselleck to articulate the relationship between conceptual history and social history.

Let us take a concept like that of freedom. The history that can be reconstructed is made by the radical modification of its meaning in the transit beyond the “Sattelzeit”, in which it becomes the singular collective leading to the depletion of the plural and differentiated *libertates* of the world of estates (with reference to the exemptions and privileges pertaining to the system of common law that encodes them).

12 See Reinhart Koselleck. “Begriffsgeschichte and Social History”, in *Future Past...*, pp. 75-92.

13 See Melvin Richter. “Conceptual History (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and Political Theory”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 14, N° 4, 1986, pp. 604-637; “Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 48, N° 2, 1987, pp. 247-263; *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1995; “Begriffsgeschichte in Theory and Practice: Reconstructing the History of Political Concepts and Language”, in William Melching and Wyger Velema (eds.): *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1994, pp. 121-149; Keith Tribe. “The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* Project: From History of Ideas to Conceptual History”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 31, N° 1, 1989, pp. 180-184.

But it is also made by the anchorage to expressive areas that, although *contemporary* to one another because they are present within the concept's scope of significance at a given moment, nevertheless belong to *non-contemporary* series of historical experience. At the end of the 19th century, freedom can still have radically different meanings for a farmer of the Bavarian Alps, for a nostalgic of the estates, or for a revolutionary militant, all of whom live in the same glimpse of history. In this sense, Koselleck's idea of "Zeitschichten" can be mobilized to describe structures of significance that give decisive relevance to social history compared with an otherwise truly simplified image of the progressive flow of temporality. Harry Harootunian has made it the key to a problematization of capitalism's global process as well as to a postmarxist reading of Marx.¹⁴

With this, however, a certain amount of issues remains unresolved. Not only the standpoint that is needed in order to interrogate the sources and to trace the history of concepts is that of a "Sattelzeit" which is relevant, certainly, yet drastically Eurocentric or at least Atlantic, if by Atlantic we mean the prospect that by the time of the Cold War spread in historiography to indicate the process of market formation, its institutions and the liberal model corresponding to them.¹⁵ Furthermore, such a standpoint is lined up to an idea of modernization which tends to elude the problems that cut across it, especially if it is observed from the perspective of its depletion, that is, from the point of view of the closing of the temporal gap of the "horizons of expectation" in the globalized world to which we now definitely belong.

In other words, the history of political concepts operating from Koselleck onward, although referred to the often overlooked problem of the genesis and transformation of the basic concepts of the German language, never problematizes the standpoint from which it summons the sources and makes them speak, though respecting the "Vetorecht" of their objectivity, and does not care whether the "modern world", whose genesis it wants to trace, might actually be filled with contradictions, streaks, and heterogeneities which blow up its ideal type. Moreover: it assumes this ideal type as fully determined by European constitutional history and its heading toward the State.

Hence, a series of problems I think I have to highlight. The first and most relevant issue, in our current perspective, is the one related to the

14 See Harry Harootunian. *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2015.

15 See Bernard Baylin. *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005; Jürgen Osterhammel. *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. München, Beck, 2009.

Atlantic world. While it is true that Koselleck's "Sattelzeit" is also the threshold that imposes a new impetus to colonization, which is now different from the imperial forms of the 15th and 16th centuries, because what is being formed here by virtue of technical acceleration is indeed a single world traversed by the definition of hierarchies, imbalances and gaps meant to persist as long as they are able to organize institutions and dimensions of governmentality that go far beyond mere robbery, yet keeping that kind of "Sattelzeit" as a model of general temporalization of history would obviously mean arranging global history under the auspices of one and the same paradigm of modernization. The whole history would be subsumed by a point of precipitation that functions, even where attempts were made to multiply and differentiate the "Sattelzeiten", as a fundamental catalyst in determining the standpoint that qualifies political history in terms of legal, national or European history, as far as it is completely bound to the western model of political and social relationships.¹⁶ Paul Gilroy, as everybody knows, has worked out a radically different idea of what it means to develop an "Atlantic" prospect.¹⁷

A second problem seems to me just as important. We need a theory in order for the sources to start speaking: in this statement, Koselleck sums up a centuries-old process of formation of the science of history. Not only, however, does such a theory assume the process of formation of the European State as an ideal type, by charging it with the task of defining what the "basic concepts" of politics are – the effect it produces is to round up all historical sources, including the oldest ones, irreducible to the modern experience of the State, by reading them in the light of the centrality of concepts that will only be such, that is, "basic", within the framework of the modern juridification of the political in European constitutional history. It also lines up in one single process, defined in the shadow of the State, asymmetric or heterogeneous series that only acquire their meaning with reference to the dialectical relationship that modern law, in Carl Schmitt's terms, aims at mediating.¹⁸ The alien, the

16 See Jörn Leonhard. "Erfahrungsgeschichten der Moderne: von der komparativen Semantik zur Temporalisierung europäischer Sattelzeiten", in Hans Joas and Peter Vogt (eds.): *Begriffene Geschichte. Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2011, pp. 423-448; Javier Fernández Sebastián. "Tradiciones Electivas. Cambio, continuidad y ruptura en historia intelectual", *Almanack Guarhulos* N.º. 7, 2014, pp. 5-26; Ulrike Kirchberger. "Multiple Sattelzeiten. Zeitkulturen in der atlantischen Welt", *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 393, N.º. 3, 2016, pp. 671-704.

17 See Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London, Verso, 1993.

18 See Gennaro Imbriano. *Le due modernità. Critica, crisi e utopia in Reinhart Koselleck*. Roma, Derive Approdi, 2016; *Der Begriff der Politik. Die Moderne als Krisenzeit im Werk von Reinhart Koselleck*. Frankfurt am Main, Campus Verlag, 2018; Sandro Chignola. "La politica, il Politico e il suo concetto. Koselleck, Schmitt, la *Begriffsgeschichte*", *Filosofia politica*, Vol. 30, N.º. 2, 2016, pp. 233-256.

enemy, the barbarian, the heathen or the Jew are thus recovered into a single form of juridification of political relations, whose “concept” is derived from European modernity, and entirely embedded in its process (“Zur historisch-politischen Semantik asymmetrischer Gegenbegriffe”, *VZ*, 211-259).¹⁹ The theory that mobilizes the sources by virtue of the dictate which makes them meaningful “for us” – here Koselleck directly enacts Max Weber’s methodological prescription²⁰ – engenders an effect of colonization by western and modern categories that works on the history of political thought both “vertically” (the antique being filtered by the legal and political lexicon of the State) and “horizontally” (by leveling, homogenizing, and compatibilizing *other* experiences of history and politics with the European one, thus tracing them back to its model, albeit by difference).

Finally, there is a third decisive matter. A history of concepts based on Koselleck’s model is not able to work on itself retrospectively, namely to historicize the idea of contemporaneity it operates with. Working on the terminology of politics – I have emphasized it on other occasions – means *de-termining* the experience of the State as much backward as forward.²¹ *Terminus* is the Latin god of borders. I intend to argue that if the discontinuity imposed by modernity is caused by the irruption of the State and coincides with the history of the State – an irruption that implies the catastrophe of the ancient and medieval idea of politics as well as the imposition of a logic, that of sovereignty, which marginalizes, when it does not fully obliterate, even in the Western world, other modalities (republican, federalist, communitarian or communist) of the individual and collective experience of history – then for the last few decades we have been able to say that this history has somehow come to an end. The State exists, of course, and it exists in the same national layout it has been endowing itself with over the last three centuries. Yet its existence – overwhelmed by globalization,²² by the migrations over which it claims to take control,²³ by the rise of post-statal forms of

19 See Reinhart Koselleck. “The Historical-Political Semantic of Asymmetric Counterconcepts”, in *Future Past...*, pp. 155-191.

20 See Max Weber. *Die “Objektivität” sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis* (1904), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen, Mohr, 1922, p. 170.

21 See Sandro Chignola and Giuseppe Duso. *Storia dei concetti e filosofia politica*. Milano, Franco Angeli, 2008; Sandro Chignola. “History of Political Thought and the History of Political Concepts. Koselleck’s Proposal and Italian Research”, *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 23, N° 3, 2002, pp. 517-541.

22 See Saskia Sassen. *Territory, Authority and Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

23 See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson. *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2013.

spatiality²⁴ and *governance*,²⁵ by the financialization of capitalism – has become, so to speak, *ghostly*.

De-termining the experience of the State by its own “terms”, understood as its basic concepts, means identifying the point of their breakthrough, their operational logic, the resonance effect that they produce in the organization of the modern political form (an irresistible sovereignty that cordons the territory of validity of its own law; a formulation of the bond that leaves the citizens free because it is conceived as the expression of their equality and general will; the monopoly of violence exercised by the sovereign as a guarantee of the integral incorporation of the latter into the whole of the Nation: from Hobbes up to modern western democracies nothing disrupts this device), in order to highlight its stopping point; the appearance of an epoch that discloses the standpoint from which we are allowed to historicize the very modern experience of the State. There is no trace of all this in Koselleck.

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Christian Geulen was maybe the first to hazard an attempt to historicize 20th-century concepts by proposing a set of categories able to define the “threshold” of escape from contemporaneity, understood as the age of national revolutions assumed by Koselleck as a “point of view” for the reconstruction of western constitutional history.²⁶ Not only does the fall of the Berlin Wall close the horizon of expectation opened up by the 18th-century philosophy of history, but the media-based present we belong to – the post-ideological and disenchanting present that marks the point of access to an “era without expectations” – is crisscrossed by the multiplication of experiences and by their arduous processability, considering that in many cases they depend on second-rate observations (media, fashion, marketing) that do not represent the world as it is but rather strengthen and extend the way we perceive it.²⁷

24 See Carlo Galli. *Political Spaces and Global War*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

25 See Wendy Brown. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York, Zone Books, 2015.

26 See Christian Geulen. “Plädoyer für eine Geschichte der Grundbegriffen des 20. Jahrhunderts”, *Zeithistorischen Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* N°. 7, 2010, pp. 79-97.

27 See Niklas Luhmann. *Beobachtungen der Moderne*. Opladen, Westdeutsche Verlag, 1992.

The precarization of labor, the impossibility of medium or long-term investments, the difficulty in maintaining consumer standards in the neoliberal hyper-competitiveness and in the absence of the welfare guarantees achieved over the 20th-century, erode the chances of temporalization of experience. Expectation is no longer tied to the idea of the future, but spatializes itself in the present it strives to prolong, thus saturating it with anticipations fueled by the market supply. If modernity is characterized by a drastic experience of acceleration compared to the traditional perception of time, now this same acceleration – hyper-acceleration determined by technological developments, connectivity and pressures that produce intolerable rhythms of life – engenders some sort of fibrillation, a sort of stasis traversed by an extremely fast oscillation, which immediately dismisses the reliability of experiences and expectations and contracts the time spans we can call the “present”. Hartmut Rosa elaborates this point precisely with reference to Koselleck.²⁸

Geulen, in turn, derives from here a radical problematization of the categories of experience and expectation working in Koselleck’s definition of “Sattelzeit”. It is no longer a matter of anticipating an open and different future, which is able to eradicate the traditional areas of experience by hurling them into the unknown. The present seizes the future and detemporalizes it. This means therefore overthrowing the scheme that makes it possible for Koselleck – who assumes the Kantian precept that there is neither experience without concept nor concept without experience – to determine the concepts of the modern experience of temporality. The present we live in, on our leave from the short 20th-century, cannot be categorized as the gap between a “space of experience” [*Erfahrungsraum*] and a “horizon of expectation” [*Erwartungshorizont*], but rather as a drastic reversal into a “space of expectation” [*Erwartungsraum*] and a “horizon of experience” [*Erfahrungshorizont*], precisely in its folding in on itself and in its indefinite dilation as a field of anticipations devoid of any possible futurization.

It follows that, if Koselleck assumes as the indicators of the transformation of concepts the processes that *ideologize*, *politicize*, *temporalize*, and *democratize* their power of signification with reference to a future experienced as a field of possibilities, we should find other indicators in order to visualize the structures by means of which the closure of the horizons of expectation fuels the self-reflexive cycle of contemporary society. Geulen proposes those of “scientification” [*Verwissenschaftlichung*],

28 See Hartmut Rosa. *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality*. Aarhus, NSU Press, 2010.

“popularization” [*Popularisierung*], “liquefaction” [*Verflüssigung*], and “spatialization” [*Verräumlichung*].

By the first one he refers to the transfer of concepts, ideas, and categories of single scientific disciplines into others, thus settling in areas of knowledge that do not coincide with either of them. Concepts of biology or natural history such as “evolution” or “development”, for example – but Geulen also makes reference to some technical concepts of psychoanalysis – are generalized in their use and become forms of self-description of the social systems. “Popularization”, which he opposes to the category of “democratization” employed by Koselleck, is not related to the vulgarization or simplification of the meaning of concepts, but to their appropriation and dissemination in the info-sphere. By “liquefaction”, Geulen means the process by which previously rigid semantic structures change through their borrowing from or transferring to other areas, thus unexpectedly hybridizing their content. Many of the concepts recurring in the decline of the 20th-century present such features: for example, “population”, “body”, “information”, “network”, “interaction”, among others.

However, it seems to me that the category of *spatialization* is the one that gives us more prompts for reflection. By means of it, I argue, Geulen refers to what we might call the experience of the becoming-world of capital, if by this we intend to grasp the discontinuity introduced – compared to the previous imperial forms of accumulation – by the algorithms that mark the contemporary financialization of value. Geulen points at the saturation effect produced on the one hand by the conclusion of the cycle of “discovery” and colonial domination of the world, and on the other by the rise of a global market that entraps the whole space in its own process, thus subordinating it to a different use of temporality. This is not a matter of acceleration, but a matter of “räumliche Weltverdichtung”, that is, a compression of space and time in the networks of data circulation and mining, in the algorithms of logistics and transport, in the movements of mass migration, which of course do not abolish time but rather accelerate it, so to speak, “on the spot”.²⁹ The present is an oscillatory one, made of constant fibrillations, filled up with exchanges, but in fact devoid of prospects, or possibilities, of futurization.

Geulen does not take it that far. He employs the category of spatialization in order to point out how the 20th-century, which represents the target of his historicization, is marked by experiences of territorialization that are left behind by the crisis of the notions of progress and

29 Christian Geulen. “Plädoyer für eine Geschichte der Grundbegriffen...”, p. 89.

history pertaining, instead, to the philosophies of history Koselleck assumes as the indicators of the “Sattelzeit” between the 18th and the 19th centuries. From communism as a prospect of liberation to “socialism in one country”; from Darwin’s evolutionism to the Nazi racial fixism, along with the resulting “Daseinskampf” in the fierce competition for the “living space”; from the predominance of concepts of movement (“civilization”, “enlightenment”, “modernization”) to the predominance of geographical or national characterizations that mark the appropriation and consequent segmental irradiance of tendencies (“americanization”, “sovietization”, “germanization”, “balcanization”).

If we are interested in discussing the possible coordinates of a history of concepts in a global perspective, however, the category of “spatialization” seems to provide further incentives.

The first point brings us back to the becoming-world of capital. It seems to me that we should assume not a form but rather an operational logic of connection, hierarchization, and valorization of heterogeneous spaces, where flows of living beings, productive processes, and data are territorialized by virtue of synchronizations, imbalances or disjunctions of times. Contrary to an image that has long been predominant in the debate on globalization, which duplicates, even though by reversing it, the debate about the end of history, we do not live in a smooth and post-historical present.

By analyzing the keynotes of a “spatial turn” in global history, Matthias Middel and Katja Naumann, have pointed out that the flows of data, living and goods, travelling the world with no more easily recognizable starting points nor strictly fixed paths, are the object of *assemblages* that involve trajectories of both deterritorialization and reterritorialization of global dimensions.³⁰ The historian who wants to raise the question of globalization – as I have pointed out earlier, it is a process that cannot be assumed in continuity with the formation of the world-system, but rather marks a profound discontinuity with respect to the categories employed to study it³¹ – has to focus on at least two things: on the one hand, the objective situation we are facing, and on the other the series of political projects, heterogeneous to such an extent that they are mutually conflicting, which aim at redefining by the term

30 See Matthias Middel and Katja Naumann. “Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the History of Critical Junctures of Globalization”, *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 5, Nº. 1, 2010, pp. 149-170.

31 See Immanuel Wallerstein. *The Modern World-System*. 3 vols. New York, Academic Press, 1974-1989; *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004; Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly J. Silver. *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

“globalization” the very meaning of the modern notions of sovereignty and interdependence. I say *political* projects because, as I argue, just to give an example, both the subjectivity expressed by the migration processes and the global legal-administrative devices meant to seize and govern them are *political*.

The dissolution of the national sovereign State’s hierarchical spatial order; the multiplication of the actors involved in global interactions; the heterogeneity of the spatial dimensions condensed in the *assemblages* that define the knots (or, better, the *entanglements*) of the legal, political and social networks spread out all over the globe. All these things provide us with the signature, the “Auszeichnung”, to use a Kantian word, of the time we belong to. This also radically changes the “standpoint” from which we are allowed to build the genealogical perspective through which contemporaneity can be historicized and evaluated all along the transformation of its conceptual components.

Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann have proposed three new hermeneutic categories for the “spatial turn” of global history:³² “portals of globalization”, “regimes of territorialization”, and “critical junctures of globalization”.³³ By these notions, which I mention here as a second point worthy of attention, they refer to the need to question the relationship between space and time determined by the decentralization of the national State, both on the side that deprives it of the monopoly on its own history (which, if we assume a global perspective, mostly took place *outside of it*, involving trade relationships, internal and external migration processes, colonization), and on the side that multiplies it in a series of spaces streaked by the combination of cross-border relations and by specific processes of territorialization or regionalization, which pinpoint heterogeneous dimensions of social, economic, and political spatiality, along with the complicated tangle of histories that traverse them.

Furthermore, these same dimensions of space also fix – and this is the third thing I want to point out – the points of negotiation or conflict between the flowing streams and the structures that control them. History is made of multiple levels, layers, flaps, sliding plans or blocks that must be accounted for in their heterogeneity in order for an archeology of the spaces and times of the political to be possible. If concepts emerge from experience and in turn experience, in order to be such, demands conceptualization, then a history of concepts can only originate from

32 See Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann (eds.). *Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften*. Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2008; Barney Warf and Santa Arias (eds.). *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. London, Routledge, 2008.

33 Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann. “Global History and the Spatial Turn...”, p. 153.

the recovery, the recognition and the tracking of the different times and spaces involved in the complex stratigraphy of global history.

Reinhart Koselleck has employed the category of “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” with reference to the layers of time mounting up as a specific form of historical experience. The extended present, in which it shrinks because of the erosion of the spaces of expectation, generalizes its possibilities of application³⁴ and suggests the suitability of combining Koselleck’s notion of “Zeitschichten” with that of “Raumschichten”.³⁵ Assuming both of them means not only snatching history from the national and sovereignty-based mortgage weighing on it due to the Eurocentric paradigm of development that ties it to the State – in other words, conceiving history in a multilingual, multi-temporal and heterogeneous way – but also radicalizing the notion of “space of experience” or “horizon of expectation” by looking at the different fields and places where differentiated forms of the relationship between historical actors and their opportunities of action have emerged.

Stratified spaces are the multilevel spaces of experience where subjects uprooted from the frameworks of national citizenship or from the affiliations that identify them in administrative or policing terms interact or have historically interacted in times and moments as much differentiated compared to the unilinear development retrospectively projected by modernity as *one’s own* history. Historical actors pursue interests or bring desires into play; they shape their own experience and, so to speak, *conceptualize* it in historically multilateral and multi-temporal contexts. They mold spaces and times, which therefore become historical, by moving through them.³⁶

A history of concepts in a global perspective should therefore assume as its center of gravity the fabric of conflicts, tensions and contradictions that, once torn apart the linear idea of temporality, come to the surface as the heterogeneous assemblage of spaces and times in a history that is once and for all released from the nation, from sovereignty, and from its purported Eurocentric balancing.

34 See Helge Jordheim. “‘Unzählbar viele Zeiten’. Die Sattelzeit im Spiegel der Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen”, in Hans Joas and Peter Vogt (eds.): *Begriffene Geschichte...*, pp. 449-480.

35 See Hagen Schulz-Forberg. “The Spatial and Temporal Layers of Global History: A Reflection on Global Conceptual History through Expanding Reinhart Koselleck’s Zeitschichten into Global Spaces”, *Historical Social Research*, Vol. 38, Nº. 3, 2013, pp. 40-58. Available in <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-387039>, accessed 30 April 2020.

36 See Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.

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It seems to me that a few conclusions can be drawn from all this. The first one could be stated as follows. Raising the problem of a history of political concepts in a global perspective means, I argue, at least two things. On the one hand, it means asking the question of what a “global perspective” is, both in relation to its being a “standpoint” (i.e., an opportunity of historicization with reference to the Eurocentric, sovereignty-based and national premises implicitly operating in the modern science of history), and in relation to its being, indeed, “global” (a concept whose history ought to be traced, by taking into account its break, or its points of irreducible tension, with respect to the concept of “world”). On the other hand, it means maintaining the “subjective” point of view, so to speak, that allows us to build the history we are interested in by staying focused on the instruction and isolation of *problems*, without yielding to the temptation of “the global petition of reality as a whole to be portrayed”, to say it with Michel Foucault, to which historians usually surrender.³⁷

A second conclusion, which I think can be drawn, concerns the idea of “contemporaneity”. It seems to me that it should be thought of both as a threshold for the transformation of modern concepts (the era we belong to is very different from the Fordist, sovereign, national, “constitutional” 20th-century) and as a quite specific form of composition – i.e., a tangle of tensions, a compound of stories, a twist of issues – between heterogeneous spaces and times. It obliges us to deal with conceptual history both synchronically (as much in the present we live in as in the different “historical” presents that have intertwined across the evolution of its process) and diachronically (by making a genealogy of contemporaneity), while staying aware of the multilaterality of the access points of its history and of the multi-stratification of the experiences that traverse it. Space and time – the cornerstones of the historiogenesis of concepts – must be considered as thoroughly denaturalized as well as materially organized and innervated by subjective, institutional, and “political” practices.

I would like to spell out a third and final conclusion. Concepts are not just *indicators*, but also concrete *factors* of the historical process, as Koselleck reminds us. The practices I have been pointing at contribute to configuring them. This means that, even in what modern history regards as its own “margins”, experiences of hybridization with

37 See Michel Foucault. “The Dust and the Cloud”, in Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia (eds.): *French Studies in History*. Vol. 2. New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1990, pp. 323-233.

the western vocabulary are processed (appropriations, translations, twists) that overthrow its meanings and uses. A history of concepts in a global perspective does not know subalternity nor subalterns, because it deals with spaces and times regardless of their hierarchization – this is a premise that I think should be assumed as operative – thus radically decentralizing the “standpoint” that (historically) organizes such a hierarchy. At this height, the “veto-power” of the sources also gets immediately available as political *agency*. Moreover, and foremost, it becomes a direct expression of subjectivity. And this in turn implies that the very selection of the sources to be dealt with is problematic: provincializing Europe here – to resume Chakrabarty’s worthwhile exhortation³⁸ – also means provincializing philosophy, its authorial series, the teleology of significance in which its history is epitomized, in order to handle knowledge, along with the concepts and generative grammars that produce them, by assuming the relevance that suits them. The history of political concepts is not the history of the Political. It is rather the history of the imaginaries and of the institutional projects that, by means of it, have neutralized politics. That very same politics which, in the becoming-world of capital, raises immediate expectations – here and now – of freedom and equality.

38 See Dipesh Chakrabarty. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

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