



“Dazwischen”: Reinhart Koselleck and Political Philosophy¹

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Abstract

The article focuses on Koselleck's historical ontology. History does not develop itself according to an inherent logic –that the philosophy of history, this quite peculiar product of modernity, must be abolished is a constant idea in Koselleck's work–, but in the “in-between” that defines the space of tension between different experiences of temporality and different visions of the future within which historical actors relate. That action is not subject to any internal necessity or determinate causality. This implies not only the need to deconstruct the assumptions at the core of modern historical studies, but also implies an idea of historicity that recognizes and enacts heterogeneous factors, the co-presence of different temporalities (and sometimes in acute tension with each other) in the stratigraphy of any historical object, that agglutinates the very notion of experience around an eminently political and collective center of gravity.

Keywords: Historical Ontology, Philosophy of History, Political Philosophy, Koselleck, Schmitt, Heidegger.

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Resumen: “Dazwischen”: Reinhart Koselleck y la filosofía política

El artículo se centra en la ontología histórica de Koselleck. La historia no se desarrolla según una lógica inherente —que la filosofía de la historia, ese producto tan peculiar de la modernidad, debe ser abolida es una idea constante en la obra de Koselleck—, sino en el “intermedio” que define el espacio de tensión entre diferentes experiencias de la temporalidad y diferentes visiones del futuro dentro del cual se relacionan los actores históricos. Esa acción no está sujeta a ninguna necesidad interna ni causalidad determinada. Esto implica no solo la necesidad de deconstruir los supuestos en los que se basan los estudios históricos modernos, sino también una idea de historicidad que reconozca y represente factores heterogéneos, la co-presencia de temporalidades diferentes (y a veces en aguda tensión entre sí) en la estratigrafía de cualquier objeto histórico, que aglutine la noción misma de experiencia en torno a un centro de gravedad eminentemente político y colectivo.

Palabras clave: Ontología histórica, Filosofía de la historia, Filosofía política, Koselleck, Schmitt, Heidegger.



I do not want to deal, within this text, with Koselleck's work philologically—I already did this on other occasions²— but rather to assess its general relevance for political philosophy. To discuss this, at least two conditions must be met. The first concerns a field choice. By political philosophy I do not mean either analytical or abstract normative political philosophy. The former regards philosophy as complete in its formal language, which implies neglecting history. The latter elaborates proposals for the orientation of practice and, precisely for this reason, temporarily detaches itself from its historicity by supplementing or correcting

2. See Sandro Chignola and Giuseppe Duso. *Historia de los conceptos y filosofía política*. Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2009; Sandro Chignola. “Diferencia y repetición. Brunner, Koselleck, la historia conceptual”, *Conceptos históricos*, Nº 1, 2015, pp. 18-38. Available in <https://revistasacademicas.unsam.edu.ar/index.php/conhist/article/view/1>, access 1st July 2023; Id., “Sobre el concepto de lo político. Koselleck, Schmitt, Heidegger”, in Gonzalo Bustamante Kuschel y Carolina Bruna (comps.): *Historia conceptual y politización de una teoría*. Valencia, Tirant lo Blanch, 2021, pp. 83-118; Id., “Historia de los conceptos, historia constitucional, filosofía política. Sobre el problema del léxico político moderno”, *Res Publica*, Nº 11-12, 2003, pp. 27-67; Id., “History of Political Thought and the History of Political Concepts. Koselleck's Proposal and Italian Research”, *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 23, Nº 3, 2002, pp. 517-541.

it through categories whose universality is assumed without evaluating their implicit historical conditions. What Koselleck stresses, and this is the most important thing for a philosophy that wants to call itself political, is rather the absolute centrality of the concrete dimensions of historicity.

To this purpose, I would like to recall a few things. The first concerns the text published by Koselleck in 1971. Here, Koselleck problematizes the status of history, which does not coincide with the empty container of events determined by its modern translation into a metacategory but must instead be understood in its immediate political depth: History is not just a "blind concept" (*Blindbegriff*) and the concrete dimensions of historicity must be interrogated to fathom its aporias, resistances and internal tensions, as well as its openness to the future. Every future is its own past, the past is present, and every past, like every present, has its own future: all knowledge, including that of politics, is therefore and remains "historically impregnated" (*historisch imprägniert*):³ not only in the sense that concepts "contain history", according to the particular twist that Koselleck imposes on Nietzsche, but that the collective practice into which he translates the structures of Heideggerian facticity must be understood as inexorably implicated in the historicity that **corresponds** to them. There is no politics that is not historically conditioned, and there is no history that does not express an inherent political dynamic.

This leads to the second point. In a 1961 letter to Johannes Sippel –I take it from an essay by Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder– Koselleck not only assumes that history is an intersubjective field ("*Geschichte ist immer intersubjektiv*", not a single linear series, then), but also, when referring to institutions, practices, or "personalities", Koselleck emphasizes its multilayered, contingent, and contestable texture. History does not develop itself according to an inherent logic –that the philosophy of history, this quite peculiar product of modernity, must be abolished is a constant idea in Koselleck's work– but in the "in-between" that defines the space of tension between different experiences of temporality and different visions of the future within which historical actors relate (*das spezifisch Geschichtliche liegt sozusagen immer "dazwischen"*).⁴ That action is not subject to any internal necessity or determinate causality –and that, consequently, precise sequences or formal units

3. Reinhart Koselleck. "Wozu noch Historie?", *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 212, N° 1, 1971, pp. 1-18, here p. 4.

4. Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder, "Theorie des historisch Möglichen. Zur Historik von Reinhart Koselleck", in Id. (eds): *Reinhart Koselleck als Historiker. Zu den Bedingungen möglicher Geschichte*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021, pp. 9-60, here p. 53.

within it cannot be isolated— implies not only the need to deconstruct the assumptions of modern historical studies, which Koselleck does consistently by reconstructing, among other things, their genealogy, but also implies an idea of historicity that recognizes and enacts heterogeneous factors, the co-presence of different temporalities (and sometimes in acute tension with each other) in the stratigraphy of any historical object, that agglutinates the very notion of experience around an eminently political and collective center of gravity.

I would like to emphasize two things in this connection: for Koselleck, breaking out of the narrow boundaries of the modern philosophy of history and its abstract chronotype (epochs, homogeneous time, rigorous causal series) means not only repeating in his own way the meta-critical operation that Herder performed against Kant (“Es gibt also [...] im Universum zu Einer Zeit unzählbar viele Zeiten”, writes Herder),⁵ but also reweaving the threads of a political anthropology, the removal of which is a necessary step towards the establishment of modern formalism.

This implies that the dimension that signifies collective action is given in the complexity of the relation that modulates the relationship between events and structures, singularity and repetition, contingency and necessity, and that temporal experiences that are different and yet co-present, precisely because they are historical —the times of history are constituted from the beginning by relations between people, they always have to do with the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, with determinations that testify to differences, each characterized by its own finitude, that cannot be reduced to a unifying concept such as that of “existence”: precisely for this reason, Koselleck’s *Historik* reconfigures Heidegger’s *Dasein* in an eminently political sense— to convey a concrete historicity composed of forces, tendencies, subjectivities in a situation of constant negotiation or contrast between them.⁶ This brings into question a concept of experience that is anchored in the concreteness of political and social relations but is also open to their futurization when understood in its modern facticity, which cannot be conceived otherwise than as the matrix of any historicization.

This concept of experience is immediately political in its fundamental features and, to put it radically, refers to an ontology that is itself

5. Johann Gottfried Herder. *Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Erster Theil, Frankfurt und Leipzig, 1799, p. 76. See Reinhart Koselleck. “Wiederholungstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte”, *Saeculum*, Vol. 57, N° 1, 2006, pp. 1-15.

6. See Reinhart Koselleck. “Historik und Hermeneutik”, in Id.: *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik. Mit einem Beitrag von Hans Georg Gadamer*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2000, pp. 97-118, here p. 101.

immediately political. The topology corresponding to the space of human experience is a topology qualified by the relations expressed there: high/low (master/slave); inside/outside (friend/enemy); before/after (tradition/innovation), while the possibility of historicizing time depends on the contradictory connections inscribed there between necessity and possibility, repetition and difference. Thus, history emerges only in the gaps and frictions between different temporal layers of collective experience, between institutions and practices, between different flow rates of organized practices, and as the result of an anthropology that implies a decisive political inclination because of the species-specific features that characterize human beings: Institutions rather than instincts, language as a vehicle of communication, organization, and contestation, law as a structure of stabilization that can be either progressive or regressive, if it acts as a restraining and in any case compensatory force for experience.

Based on these premises, Koselleck's history of concepts gains its relevance as well as its own particular scopes. Terms are as much indicators of change as they are factors in the organization of collective experience. They "contain" history in the sense that different layers of meaning are deposited in their duration and heterogeneous collective experiences are filed under indicators that have a certain permanence and are much more mobile as far as they refer to the contrasting evolutionary nature of social processes. Historical action is given, so to speak, only *dazwischen*, between the premises that condition it (institutions, codes, stabilized regimes of expectations) and the innovations it establishes through collective practices that as such introduce tensions, contrasts, conflicts between what is and what is not yet, according to that "surplus of possibilities" (*Überschuss von Möglichkeiten*) that characterizes human action as directly political.⁷ Concepts change much more slowly than the practices that use them, but practices cannot avoid relating to the concepts through which they are articulated: in this relationship –the dynamic relationship, one might say with Wittgenstein, between the stream of the river and the riverbed, as long as the latter is constantly eroded, washed away, and changed by the former⁸– conceptual history unfolds its most authentic potential and emancipates itself from the merely auxiliary role it otherwise has vis-à-vis social history.⁹ "Conceptual history" is the key to an inherently political historicity, and

7. Reinhart Koselleck. "Historik und Hermeneutik...", p. 110.

8. See Ludwig Wittgenstein. *On Certainty*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1969, § 99.

9. See Reinhart Koselleck. "Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte", in Id.: *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1979, pp. 107–129, here p. 118.

for this very reason semantics is the field of expression of tensions, problems, collective projects.

I can therefore go back to political philosophy. As I already mentioned, “conceptual history” contributes to detaching and deconstructing the mainstream paradigms of analytical political philosophy and normative political philosophy. It has nothing to say either to Rawls or Habermas or, all the more so, to those who scholastically repeat or rearrange their positions. Rather, it serves those who, instead of letting the field of politics collapse into that of public discussion, want to locate their perspective in the interstice, in the concrete “in-between” that opens up between practice and its institutional precipitation. It is in such an in-between space that political philosophy, if understood as I personally believe it should, expresses itself (a) as a genealogical reconstruction of political knowledge and the effects of concepts at the legal, administrative, and constitutional levels (this is the first level at which *Begriffsgeschichte* becomes central) and (b) as a critical function exercised in relation to them (the second level of application of “conceptual history”: from genealogy to the surplus of possibilities that characterizes historical action in a sense I will try to specify).

From the beginning, the political philosopher does not think in a vacuum, nor does he get into a position of overshadowing in relation to the practice in which he participates. He thinks in the concreteness of the historicity to which he belongs, and his points of view are points of view within the space of articulation of collective experience. Analytic or normative political philosophers should be reminded of the sense of “shame” that Plato, by his own admission, felt when he ran the risk of being regarded merely as a talker, a “word-maker”, if he had not tried, on his trip to Syracuse, to “put his teachings into practice” and to deal with the Real of the political: the organizational, institutional dimension in which practice consolidates or stabilizes –and certainly does not neutralize, for otherwise there would be no history– its own tensions.¹⁰ The *exergazethai* of philosophy, its transition to action, arises in the gap between theory and practice, between philosophy and politics, between the surplus of reflection and its practical outcome, which characterizes the concrete dimension of historicity, if by this we mean, with Koseleck, that which drives and that which limits, that which stimulates and that which determines, the singular and collective expressiveness of man within the framework of his forms of life. Politics expresses itself in durable structures –that is, the dimensions of repetition of experience: language, law, institutions– and interrupts the rhythm of concrete

10. Plato. *Letter VII*. 328c.

historicity by producing and metabolizing innovation in the transit that takes place between these dimensions of duration and their characteristic processuality; a processuality that creates friction (between duration and innovation), tension (between experiences and expectations of units of action, as Koselleck calls social groups, using a term taken up by Carl Schmitt and Hans Frayer), slows down (the density of law counteracts, arrests, and sustains the accelerations of social movement).

This emerges, including the implicit reference to the practice of conceptual history, from the study of Prussia between Reform and Revolution that Koselleck published in 1967, and whose relevance, at least in my view, is key to anyone seeking to understand Koselleck's thought.¹¹ Here, even before his better-known essays, the tension between theoretical project (the reform movement formulated in the preparatory writings for the *Allgemeine Landrecht*), forms of life (from time to time in advance or behindhand with respect to codification), spaces of experience, and horizons of expectation, linguistic redefinition of the political lexicon and tradition (suffice it to recall the care with which Koselleck reconstructs, within this framework, the transformation of terms essential to the *Sattelzeit*, such as *Stand*, *Klasse*, *Proletariat*, *Haus*, *Familie*, *Gesellschaft*, *Opposition*, among others), becomes the object of an investigation that deals with the various regimes of historicity that are co-present in a given section of history that proves to be politically permeated even in its seemingly dry forms of discursive organization. The call for an "integral history of law" (*integral Rechtsgeschichte*),¹² which is capable of encompassing social history, constitutional history, the history of political thought and political institutions, and which for this very reason selects its sources without prior hierarchization (Svarez, Hegel, Marx are treated in this study in the same way as parliamentary sources, the stances of territorial nobility, constitutional projects, periodical press, administrative circulars), can also be taken up by a history of political philosophy that embraces the only worthwhile venture of situating itself in the concrete *dazwischen*, in the "in-between", in which discursive formations and structures, including those referring to the social movement, materially organize and circulate in the political field. Beyond the history of political philosophy, however, there is a political philosophy tout court.

I shall therefore return to the two uses of "conceptual history" (*Begriffsgeschichte*) which is not, as is sometimes claimed, to be understood

11. See Reinhart Koselleck. *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution*. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1967.

12. Reinhart Koselleck, "Geschichte, Recht und Gerechtigkeit", in Id. *Zeitschichten...*, pp. 336-358, here p. 357.

simply as a methodological complement to the history of ideas. To do conceptual history, especially regarding the archives of the history of philosophy, certainly means contextualizing the meaning and the uses of concepts in specific historical contexts, but above all it means not yielding to the enchantment that has been historically generated in the West through the formation of the state understood as the definitive organizing formula of the political problem. In the words of Carl Schmitt, although the state is a concrete, ordinal concept, the concept of the state must be understood as strictly bound to modern times and cannot be used to filter the entire political experience of the West.¹³ This, of course, also applies to the archive of authors from the history of political philosophy. What needs to be deconstructed is the notion of “politics” that starts from the state and relates the entire field of interpersonal relations to the state (or political entity). Moreover, and this is what I referred to earlier when I evoked the second level of deployment of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), it must be assumed that the modern solution to the political problem, the one whose invention, force, and “epochal” impact can be shown to have taken place between Absolutism and the French Revolution, between Hobbes and Sieyès, imposes itself with the removal of other possible formulas of organization, which, as I believe I can say for the concept of “temporal strata”, of *Zeitschichten* adopted by Koselleck, nevertheless remain available as expressions of the surplus of possibilities that characterizes historical experience through its provisional realizations, regarded as latent but equally concrete virtualities.

When I spoke of the critical, eminently philosophical-political function that conceptual history assumes, I did not intend to speak of some sort of critique of ideology. The latter refers the textual dimensions, which for Koselleck are the immediate expression of historicity, to an external reality which they tend to obscure, falsify, or distort. The operation that the history of concepts enables beginning with Otto Brunner and Reinhart Koselleck is much more radical, namely the historical analysis of how the modern political apparatus came to be implanted as a strictly legal formalization of practices. This is not axiologically characterized: Philosophy does not judge whether the state's solution to the political problem was good or bad. The state emerges (a) as a structure for neutralizing the bourgeois religious wars –Koselleck's reference to Schmitt is evident in *Kritik und Krise*, but also in the contribution “Staat, Souveränität” co-authored with Werner Conze for the

13. See Carl Schmitt. “Staat als konkreter, an eine geschichtliche Epoche gebundener Begriff (1941)”, in Id.: *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1924-1954. Materialien zu einer Verfassungslehre*. Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1958, pp. 375-385.

*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*¹⁴—; (b) as a legal apparatus for individuating social relations through the imperative sovereignty of the law; (c) as an instrument for depoliticizing the ancient *societas civilis* and its internal political articulations through the monopoly of the sovereign's exercise of power. The genealogical analysis of the modern concept of politics finds in Hobbes and in the logic of monarchic absolutism (which, paradoxically, as Tocqueville noted, has survived without interruption through French revolutionary constitutionalism and Napoleonic public law) the breaking-in of an organizational logic that radically transforms political theory. Absolutism invents (theory) and brings into being (practice), in the truest sense of the word, a new political formula which, by overriding the prudential and "practical" terms of Latin Aristotelianism, brings practice into a relationship of strict and definitive dependence on the theory. In this way, the concept of "historicity" (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is eliminated in its material complexity. Together with the juridification of relations through the modern concept of law (which is neither good nor bad, but is considered law, that is, an expression of the will of the sovereign, be it a king or the parliamentary assembly in which it is represented as the general will of the people, as in modern democracies), the modern political apparatus achieves an abstract geometrization of singular and collective action that synchronizes historical times with the homogeneous empty time of the collective singular of the state. The clock takes the place of the scale. The individual, the abstract subject of an equally abstract will, replaces as a political pivot the stratified reality of groups, associations, and heterogeneous interests that previously constituted what Tocqueville, using a phrase recurring in Brunner and taken up by Koselleck himself, called "the old European social and political constitution" (*l'ancienne constitution de l'Europe*).¹⁵ Thus, the dimension of concrete historicity is abolished and removed.

In this diagnosis, "conceptual history" (*Begriffsgeschichte*), "integral legal history" (*integrale Rechtsgeschichte*) and the theory of historical times converge in Koselleck. But this diagnosis, which is also the field of the genealogy of modernity, if we understand the concept of genealogy in the sense in which it is established between Nietzsche and Foucault,¹⁶

14. See Reinhart Koselleck. *Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*. Freiburg-München, Karl Alber, 1959; Id. and Werner Conze. "Staat, Souveränität", in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.): *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Vol. VI. Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1990, pp. 4-154.

15. See Alexis de Tocqueville. *L'Ancien Régime et Révolution*. Paris, Gallimard, [1856] 1967, bk. I, chap. IV, p. 76.

16. See Michel Foucault. *Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire* (1971) in Id.: *Dits et écrits I, 1954-1975*. Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 1004-1024. But also see the recent: Michel Foucault. *Le Discours philosophique*. Paris, EHESS/Gallimard/Seuil, 2023, chap. 1.

is also the critical diagnosis of political philosophy, if by this we mean in turn the descent of philosophical analysis into the “in-between” between theory and practice, between thought and institutions, between structure and social movement, between diagnosis and prognosis.

Prognosis is a recurring and very important theme in Koselleck. When history is experienced in its complexity, as a movement of forces and currents in mutual tension whose reciprocal relationship is constantly changing through variable degrees of “intensification, stiffening, or acceleration”, crucial to a prognosis that can finally abandon teleology is the “consciously taken standpoint” that makes it possible to decipher the tendency. Lorenz von Stein, the “historical ontologist” (*Geschichtsentologe*) that Koselleck himself aspired to be in the letter to Carl Schmitt in January 1953,¹⁷ was able to maintain the “perspectivism” on which his prognosis was based precisely because he managed to separate duration from temporality, the structures from their movement.¹⁸ For Koselleck, this standpoint is the historically conditioned duration of the state and its concepts. But it is also the view of the absence of the state in Germany that makes it possible to evaluate federalism as a possible future for a post-national Europe that does not merely want to be an economic area,¹⁹ This is a reference that combines genealogy and political critique; archaeology of legal-political knowledge and position-taking.

Personally, I do not go that far. But I believe that political philosophy must locate itself in this dense and contrasting in-between space that coincides with the space of historicity and its tensions. If philosophy wants to call itself political, it can only enter this space genealogically, i.e., equipped with conceptual history, and formulate a diagnosis (of how we got where we are, Foucault would say)²⁰ and a prognosis (by deciphering the tendencies, the pulling, accelerating, and braking forces that the present contains in the movement that pushes it beyond itself). This is not about values, moral philosophy, or linguistic analysis. Rather, it is about the political responsibility of philosophy. The responsibility that belongs to it from the moment of its emergence in Greece.

17. See Koselleck to Schmitt, 21 January 1953, in Reinhart. Koselleck and Carl. Schmitt: *Der Briefwechsel 1953-1983 und weitere Materialien*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2019, p. 11.

18. See Reinhart Koselleck. “Geschichtliche Prognose in Lorenz von Steins Schrift zur preußischen Verfassung”, in Id.: *Vergangene Zukunft...*, pp. 87-104, esp. p. 92.

19. See Reinhart Koselleck. “Diesseits des Nationalstaats. Föderale Strukturen der deutschen Geschichte”, in Id.: *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2006, pp. 486-503.

20. See Michel Foucault. *Qu'est-ce que les lumières?* (1984), in Id.: *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*. Paris, Gallimard, 2001, pp. 1381-1397.

Koselleck can use his point of view –the absence of a real state in Germany until 1990– to exploit the latent virtualities of German constitutional history and develop from them a concept of republican federalism, a stubborn layer of its political civilization waiting to be updated, rethought, and put into action.

Perhaps even more radically, but with a not too dissimilar gesture that in fact stems from my long acquaintance with his work, I think that the political genealogy of modernity, realized through the historical reconstruction of the concepts of European public law, goes hand in hand with the recovery and valorization of what modernity strives to remove in order to legitimize itself as a new epoch,²¹ and which nevertheless remains available in the deepest layers of its history. Between antiquity and pre-modernity lies the idea of the common, to *koinon*, in which the concept of politics is recomposed. A common that consists of the living matter of relations that keep practices in tension and in which groups, parts, interests of the city communicate, because the city, the *polis*, from which politics derives, is nothing but the dynamic articulation of the relations it encompasses.²² This gives us the possibility of reading the sources of the history of political philosophy differently: a vast fund of reflections anticipates, traverses, and transcends the modern concept of politics, whose monopoly is held by the state. But it also gives us the possibility to read, theoretically and practically at the same time, in the exhaustion of the driving force of the state and of the abstract forms of conceptualization that are functional for it to establish itself on the ruins of the *societas civilis* / *politiké koinonia* (the insular and seemingly irreducible concept of the individual; the rupture between public and private; the political delegitimization of interests, which I understand as a form of relation tout court: inter-est, "what is in between", among others), the need and the necessity to think and practice politics otherwise, with the cold and disenchanted gaze of those who, again like Koselleck or Max Weber before him, strive to stand with their feet firmly planted in reality and its contradictions. The contradiction, above all, between the forms of government that seek to contain it and a freedom, the freedom of the governed, which, by deploying processes of political subjectivation vis-à-vis the powers that govern it, tends to remain in its constant self-constitution basically ungovernable.

21. See Hans Blumenberg. *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999, parts I and II.

22. See Émile Benveniste. *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes I: Économie, parenté, société*. Paris, Minuit, 1969, p. 310.

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