

## INTRODUCTION



The second half of the twentieth century was a period marked by a tremendous multiplicity of discussions and innovations in historical writing and theory. A great number of fascinating authors and oeuvres, however, remain known only in the most selective fashion and are read primarily by specialists. The present study intends to examine, for the first time in its entirety, the work of one such author, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006).

Constantly probing and transgressing the boundaries of mainstream historical writing, he created numerous innovative approaches and exposed himself to a large range of impulses from other academic disciplines. His writings responded to the work of German philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer and of political thinkers such as Carl Schmitt. Koselleck's thought also responded and added to the work of internationally renowned scholars such as Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and Quentin Skinner.

Reinhart Koselleck entered the academic scene in the 1950s with his dissertation "Kritik und Krise" in which he traced the birth of modern political thought to the Enlightenment. He achieved his *Habilitation* in 1965 with the social-historical work *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> Three years later he became professor in Heidelberg, where, in the so-called Arbeitskreis für moderne Sozialgeschichte, he played a key role in the development of modern German conceptual history. Koselleck's

achievement was to design the research framework of the monumental lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, a work illuminating the transition to the modern world by means of analyzing changes taking place in social and political concepts during the period between 1750 and 1850.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning of the 1970s, when he took up a chair in historical theory at the University of Bielefeld, Koselleck also wrote a great number of essays illuminating a range of different themes—the relation between language and social history, the rise of the modern world, and issues related to historical time, human historical consciousness, theoretical-methodological matters, and fundamental philosophical questions of what history is and how it can be studied. These essays, of which many have been republished in the collections *Vergangene Zukunft* (1979), *Zeitschichten* (2000), *Begriffsgeschichten* (2006), and *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* (2010), are characterized by the use of a wide range of source material, including paintings, recorded dreams, and war memorials, as well as theories and methods from several disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> It is from this background that Koselleck continually reflected on the role of history in modern society and diagnosed the political conditions of his time, without committing himself to a fixed mode of historical writing or to a clearly defined ideological camp.

As a result of his inclination to constantly go beyond the boundaries of mainstream historical writing, Koselleck has been labeled an “outsider” and a “loner” vis-à-vis the profession.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Koselleck was a thinker striving for individuality and originality, and if he won a degree of international fame unusual for a German historian after 1945, it is because he invented research projects and analytical vocabularies that were very original. *Sattelzeit*, *Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont* and *Zeitschichten* are among the notions from his writings that have inspired numerous research programs across disciplinary and national boundaries in the last thirty years. Koselleck has gained status not only as an important theorist of history and historiography, but also as an advocate of “grand theory,” whose work scholars search for meta-theories of history and politics and of how such phenomena should be studied.

But what are, if any, the overarching themes, arguments and analytical features that hold together Koselleck’s varied body of work? How and in which contexts did he develop his work? And what, more specifically, what was innovative about it?

Pursuing these questions, this book presents an intellectual biography of Reinhart Koselleck that examines his work and the intellectual and social contexts in which it emerged. The aim of the book is not only to contribute to our understanding of the life and work of a great thinker,

but also to contribute to our understanding of complex theoretical and methodological issues in the cultural sciences, and to the history of political, historical, and cultural thought in Germany from the 1950s until the present. In the course of illuminating these matters, the book offers an overall interpretation of Koselleck's work.

The analytical framework behind this interpretation proceeds from the assumption that Koselleck's scholarly production cannot be understood from one single perspective. Instead of portraying method, theory, politics, personal experiences, institutional factors, questions of identity, or narrative arrangements as *the* epistemological center of his production of historical writing, this investigation addresses all of these perspectives and the relation among them. To do so, the analysis focuses on how Koselleck's historical writing was always made in *processes of reception*.<sup>5</sup> The analysis will show how, in these processes, Koselleck took up and transformed various discourses, and how his mode of reception was shaped by specific personal experiences, social constraints, and political factors.

To illuminate the processes of reception, the study will follow a methodological principle of continuously placing Koselleck's ideas in context.<sup>6</sup> It will, in other words, continuously sketch out his encounters with the discursive fields of scholarly and political language that he entered. The idea is not only to analyze how and why Koselleck drew on, reworked, or distanced himself in relation to the various discursive fields, but also to reveal the processes in question as mixing elements of deliberate appropriation and involuntary formation.

Koselleck's various texts are full of clues about his intellectual interaction with different discursive fields. These texts reveal the way in which he defined and positioned his work with reference to a wide range of different scholars, schools, and traditions in German and European history from Ancient Greece onwards. In addition, he often paid special recognition to his various teachers and sources of inspiration—both by referring to and using their notions and concepts and by describing a number of incidents relating to their intellectual and personal relationships, of which some unfolded and developed over long periods of time.

Against this background, the book demonstrates how Koselleck's appropriation of discourse was driven by individual expectations and aims, and how, in his work, he reworked and combined discursive elements that were often different in origin and meaning, in order to fit specific situations and problems. Hence the book shows that Koselleck's scholarly work constantly underwent a process of being shaped and reshaped. It consisted of many different discursive layers. Some layers appeared in the

majority of his writings, whereas others were applied less frequently or gradually disappeared from his analytical vocabulary.

The analytical framework also involves a perspective on what has been referred to as the *making of the historian*.<sup>7</sup> This notion refers to how the construction of historical writing goes hand in hand with the construction of scholarly identities and positions. My analysis will approach this perspective from two angles. On the one hand, it will show how, by adapting to and challenging intellectual, institutional, and societal structures—and by positioning himself toward other actors in the field—Koselleck constructed a certain intellectual habitus and identity that shaped and gave meaning to his work. On the other hand, it will demonstrate how Koselleck was also made as a historian by means of being positioned by other actors in the field, through processes of reception, and in ways that eluded individual intention or control.

### Pluralism against Utopianism and Relativism

The focus on the *processes of reception* and the *making of the historian* is crucial for the interpretation of Koselleck's work to be presented in this book. This interpretation takes its point of departure in the characterization of Koselleck as a “partisan” for “histories in plural” and against history in singular, which was put forward in a commentary by philosopher Jacob Taubes (1923–1987) in the early 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Taubes referred to the critique of modern philosophies of history that Koselleck began in *Kritik und Krise* and to his ambition of outlining an alternative concept of history: in opposition to historical-philosophic ideas of history as one, unified and progressive project, which human beings can program and direct toward a final aim, he wanted to thematize a mode of historical writing that view history as composed by a plurality of non-convergent histories that can never be shaped entirely according to human desire.

Taubes's partisan-metaphor has received little attention in the literature about Koselleck.<sup>9</sup> This book nevertheless maintains that the argument comprised in the metaphor is valid as a useful means of interpreting Koselleck's historical writing. I thus argue that his entire scholarly production can be interpreted as a series of attempts to undermine ideas of history in singular and as theorizing histories in plural, and it portrays in detail the scientific positions, political concerns, and theoretical-methodological components, as well as the changes and transformations, which were involved in these attempts from the 1950s to the 2000s.

The book also unfolds a more specific argument about Koselleck's work. It shows that his critique of historical philosophies also contained

a critique of a certain type of historical relativism as a notion based on the very same conceptual assumption: history in the singular. Just as the utopian, teleological conception of history that he identified as underlying most historical writing from the eighteenth century onwards, this type of historical relativism presupposed the idea that one could formulate a coherent theoretical position on history as a totality. Koselleck believed that utopianism and relativism alike were based on theoretically-methodologically naïve and politically dangerous assumptions of history and politics that ignored or misunderstood the basic conditions of what is humanly possible. This is why he subjected both ideas of these ideas of history to ideological and epistemological critique.

This leads us to the key argument of this study: Koselleck's writings were always driven by the ambition to establish understandings of and approaches to science and politics that go beyond utopianism and relativism. The crucial point is that Koselleck insisted that history must be plural, and that it must be written from viewpoints that are also plural. From this perspective of pluralism and in contrast to relativism, he wanted to carve out a stable, non-relativistic common viewpoint from which historical change could be described and a parameter of judgment on the basis of which the past and the present could be discussed, without falling into the pitfalls of utopianism. This ambition and the related discursive features reveal a unifying pattern and a common objective in his varied body of work.

While illuminating Koselleck's search for plural viewpoints on history, this study does not argue that he devoted his career to writing a range of minor-scale and unrelated histories. The argument is rather that he wanted to integrate, theoretically as well as empirically, the plurality of histories into narrative forms of writing history that include generalizations, without relying on historical-philosophical notions of unity, progress, and meaning. The book emphasizes that Koselleck pursued this ambition with shifting degrees of clarity and coherence in his analytical framework. Perhaps more importantly still, the study emphasizes that this ambition was met with variable degrees of success. In addition, it shows that Koselleck's analytical categories and hypotheses were always in flux and aimed at conducting empirical research rather than at forming a definite analytical framework. In fact, as he rarely explained the more exact relation between his analytical features, Koselleck's method will be portrayed as somewhat unsystematic.

This lack of theoretical system will be explained with reference to Koselleck's intellectual temperament, but will also be related to his endorsement of theoretical-methodological plurality in historical writing. For Koselleck, historical writing was not about establishing one analytical

model that leads to a state of certain knowledge about the human past, present, and future. To aim at such a model was to his eyes utopian and absurd. It was rather about developing a plurality of theories and methods with which historians can in the best possible way illuminate the specific themes and problems at stake. This plea for theoretical-methodological plurality and self-reflection is described as an integral part of his scholarly program.

## Material and Structure

My investigation is primarily based on published texts: books, articles, reviews, interviews, research programs, newspaper articles, and memory pieces. A key source are the fifty-three letters dating from the period from 1952 until 1983 in which Koselleck wrote to the German jurist and political thinker Carl Schmitt, who from around 1950 until the early 1960s functioned as one of Koselleck's intellectual sparring partners with whom he discussed scientific questions and hypotheses and communicated political issues and personal experiences.<sup>10</sup>

About half of Koselleck's letters to Schmitt were written between 1952 and 1962. In these letters, we follow Koselleck through his exams in Heidelberg; his experiences at the University of Bristol in England, where he held a lectureship from 1953 to 1954; and his contemporary search for a more permanent position. We also read of how, in 1954, Koselleck became an assistant to the historian Johannes Kühn in Heidelberg, and how, in the 1950s, he attempted to conceptualize a project for his *Habilitation*, which ended with the social-historical work *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution*, written under the auspices of Werner Conze. After Koselleck secured himself a professorship, first at the department of political science in Bochum in 1966, then at the department of history in Heidelberg in 1968, and finally in Bielefeld in 1974, the frequency of his letter writing to Schmitt slowed down. There is thus relatively little about the processes in which he conceptualized his later writings on historical time, historical writing, and war experience.

While the described material offers insights that are useful in the drawing of Koselleck's intellectual profile, it should be emphasized that archival material and Koselleck's personal papers are not included in this investigation.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there are many aspects of his scholarly production that the study cannot shed light on: first, the biographical dimensions of his work. The available material contains, for example, only very little information about the first twenty years of Koselleck's life. Here, the contextual part of the analysis has to rely on information found in

memory pieces and interviews that were published during the last fifteen years of his life.

Hence, in many instances, in this study I describe the role of historical experience in his work by analyzing how he interpreted and wrote his experiences into a set of autobiographical and generational discourses which shaped his academic identity and his way of writing history. These discourses were deeply imbedded in what has been described as the *processes of reception* and the *making of the historian* and we will see them illuminated as vital dimensions of Koselleck's intellectual profile.

The book is made up of seven chapters. It opens with a background chapter that includes a biographical view of the first three decades of Koselleck's life and broadly illuminates the intellectual, cultural, and political contexts in which his dissertation "Kritik und Krise" originated. The background chapter is followed by six chapters that highlight various dimensions of Koselleck's intellectual profile. These chapters are organized and ordered pragmatically in a compromise between chronology and themes. This is the most cogent way to pursue the main discursive features of Koselleck's work, the unifying patterns as well as the diverging aspects, through different texts and periods of his long career.

## Notes

1. Reinhart Koselleck, "Kritik und Krise: Eine Untersuchung der politischen Funktion des dualistischen Weltbildes im 18. Jahrhundert", unpublished dissertation (University of Heidelberg, 1954). The dissertation was published with a new subtitle as *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg, 1959). Reinhart Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution: Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848* (Stuttgart, 1967).
2. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, ed., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Bd. I–VIII, (Stuttgart, 1972–1997).
3. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979); *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik* (Frankfurt am Main, 2000); *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006); *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte: Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010).
4. See Rudolf Vierhaus, "Laudatio auf Reinhart Koselleck," *Historische Zeitschrift*, Bd. 251 (1989): 529.
5. Reception theory is commonly associated with the work conducted by literary scholars such as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser at the University of Konstanz from the 1960s onwards. See Paul de Man's introduction to Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis, 1982). Processes of reception have also received much attention in the work by scholars such as Carlo Ginzburg, Roger Chartier, and

- Kevin Sharpe on the dynamics of reading and writing at play in the construction of texts. For an overview of the field, see Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (London, 2001), 3–62.
6. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, (1969): 3–53.
  7. Thomas Etzemüller, “How to Make a Historian: Problems in Writing Biographies of Historians,” *Storia della Storiografia* 53 (2008): 46–57.
  8. Jacob Taubes, “Geschichtsphilosophie und Historik: Bemerkungen zu Kosellecks Programm einer neuen Historik,” in *Poetik und Hermeneutik V. Geschichte—Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (München, 1973), 493 [above and elsewhere, translations of German texts have been provided by the author unless noted otherwise].
  9. It was, however, brought up in an interview conducted by Carsten Dutt, in which Koselleck was asked to reflect on his critique of modern historical philosophy and the categories with which he had theorized history in the plural. Carsten Dutt, “Geschichte(n) und Historik: Reinhart Koselleck im Gespräch mit Carsten Dutt,” *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 2 (2001): 257–71. The most comprehensive interpretation of Koselleck’s work is found in Kari Palonen, *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe: Das Umschreiben der politischen Begriffe bei Quentin Skinner und Reinhart Koselleck* (Münster, 2004). This study draws considerably on interpretations from Palonen’s book but leaves aside one of its key arguments: namely that Koselleck’s and Skinner’s way of studying politics and language can be traced back to Max Weber. Even if Skinner in various writings has referred to Weber, it is difficult to connect his work to a Weberian point of departure or standpoint, and Koselleck never mentioned Weber among his sources of inspiration. See Bo Stråth, Review of *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe*, by Kari Palonen, *European Journal of Social Theory* 8 (2005): 530–32. For the latest contributions to the literature about Koselleck, see Hans Joas and Peter Vogt, eds., *Begriffene Geschichte: Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010); Carsten Dutt and Reinhart Laube, eds., *Reinhart Koselleck: Sprache und Geschichte* (Göttingen, 2013).
  10. The letters are located in Schmitt’s archive in Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf (registration number: RW265). So far, only Reinhard Mehring has used this correspondence in his biography *Carl Schmitt: Aufstieg und Fall* (München, 2009), and in his article “Begriffsgeschichte mit Carl Schmitt,” in *Begriffene Geschichte: Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*, ed. Hans Joas and Peter Vogt, 138–168 (Frankfurt am Main, 2010).
  11. Koselleck’s archive is now accessible at Das Deutsche Literaturarchiv Marbach and at Das Bildarchiv Foto Marburg.