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A 'DISCIPLINE OF READING'

Helge Jordheim (2001): Lesningens vitenskap. Utkast til en ny filologi. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

We can detect a broad mixture of disciplines in the background of conceptual history. Historians, philosophers, constitutional lawyers, linguists, and political theorists, in particular, tend to give a different profile to the study to be practised. Within the meetings of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group, we can also detect an extension of national and disciplinary backgrounds of the participants in the conferences and other activities since its origins in 1998.

Helge Jordheim has published a book in Norwegian with a title that is perhaps best translated as “A Discipline of Reading. An outline of a new philology”. The history of concepts seems to be completely absent among Norwegian political scientists and is hardly notable among the historians and philosophers. Jordheim, who works in the Department of German Philology at the University of Oslo, has written a pioneering study in several respects.

The author's point of departure consists of reconceptualizing philology as a discipline of reading. His main question concerns the possibilities and limits of a systematized and professional reading which he calls philology – and when doing so, dissociating himself from the traditional meaning of this discipline. As the subtitle indicates, Jordheim's intention is not a minor one: to construct an outline of a “new” philology, a new discipline in which the special objective lies in the analysis of the “reality of the text”. To this task, the

author borrows aspects from three contemporary intellectual approaches; the Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte*, the Foucauldian discourse analysis, and the Skinnerian speech act theory. With his book, Helge Jordheim makes thus a rather surprising move from the perspective of both the philologists and the historians of concepts.

Jordheim's first step is to rewrite (in the Koselleckian sense of *Umschreibung*) the history of the nineteenth century philology in Germany, from Friedrich August Wolf and Friedrich Schleiermacher to Friedrich Nietzsche. The core problem of the chapter is to discuss language-in-history, i.e. the various interpretations given to this phrase especially in the great controversies among the philologists of the nineteenth century, including Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's polemics against Nietzsche's *Geburt der Tragödie*. The next step is then to oppose philology to linguistics and, in a sense, to rehabilitate the inherently historical studies of the philologists against the unhistorical linguistics. The target of criticism is not Saussure's turn of the study of language from parole to langue as such, although a rehabilitation of the parole is a decisive step in his program. Jordheim's point is rather to illustrate how this shift has led to an unhistorical and unliterary 'science' of linguistics, as it is practised in the language departments of today.

It is such a crisis of the academic study of language that has led Jordheim not only to look backwards but also to look outside the departments of philology and linguistics, towards approaches that could better cope with "language-in-history". What is remarkable is that the linguistic critiques of conceptual history by Dietrich Busse and others are barely mentioned and the attempts to practise a linguistic history of concepts, such as done by Georg Stötzel and others in Germany, and by Jacques Guilhaumou and others in France, have not been considered at all. I consider this to be an indirect sign that Jordheim thinks, with good grounds, that it is better to a new philology to take fresh ideas from those who never have considered themselves as philologists or linguists.

What is sympathetic in Jordheim's reconceptualization of philology is his conscious avoidance of a single receipt to be applied. On the contrary, he has chosen three partly complementary, partly competing ideal typical perspectives of renovation. The names of Reinhart Koselleck, Michel Foucault and Quentin Skinner serve as 'representa-

tive anecdotes' (Kenneth Burke) of such approaches, regarded to represent different philosophical perspectives: hermeneutics, structuralism, and analytic philosophy, also neatly correspond to the distinctions between Germanic, French and Anglo-American styles of thought (cf. esp. 81-83).

The differences between the approaches are first indicated with three different modes of studying "the Enlightenment". Towards the end of his book, Jordheim experiments with the three modes of reading by using Wieland's *Das Geheimnis des Kosmopolitenordens* from 1788 as a common "textual reality". The topic deals with Jordheim's own specialty and he thus gives a convincing impression how all the three approaches can be used as strategies of reading a single text and how different both the results and especially the problematic taken up by each of the approaches can be.

In the key chapter of the comparative introduction of the perspectives Jordheim systematizes the "triadic" distinctions at different levels. As modes of dealing with language-in-history he speaks of concepts, discourses and speech acts. Furthermore, concerning the aspect of language thematized, he introduces the corresponding triad of semantics, syntax and pragmatics; in relation to history he then differentiates between temporality, discontinuity and retoricity. By these differentiations, the author distinguishes the Koselleckian, Foucauldian and Skinnerian approaches from each other. He uses this obviously as a move that strengthens his programmatic intention of a "re-foundation" of the discipline of philology. By this very move, he simultaneously recontextualizes the disciplinary and thematic origins of such approaches as Skinner's and Koselleck's in a manner that differs from their self-interpretations.

Still, it is this systematization of the differences to the triadic distinctions that provokes me to objections. It is all too schematic, resembling what another Norwegian scholar, Johan Galtung, did in the 1970s when introducing a (slightly ironic) classification of national academic styles. The use of such a classificatory scheme presupposes a common hidden agenda as if the three ideal typical variants would represent different answers to the same problematic. Such a procedure disregards the obvious possibility that the questions of the authors are highly singular and context-specific, which seems to be the case here. Or, in Skinnerian terms, the mythologies of doc-

trine and prolepsis are particularly imminent in such a triadic classification of authors and approaches. Similarly, the mythology of coherence is also lurking, at least in so far as the internal conceptual changes of each author's work – such as Skinner's turn towards rhetoric – are rather disvalued in order to attribute each author a place in the typology. In addition, important thematic profiles of the authors, such as Koselleck's studies on war memorials and political iconography in general, are left unmentioned although they clearly continue *Begriffsgeschichte* with other types of sources and problematize the role and dating of the *Sattelzeit*.

Jordheim has read the work of Skinner and Koselleck in a relatively extensive manner – how far this holds for Foucault, I am incompetent to judge – and is less dependent on the commentators than many others. Despite this, it is obvious that the mode of presentation of Koselleck, Foucault and Skinner cannot be considered as a historical introduction to their respective work but rather as a selective reading of each of them from the viewpoint of the philology-refoundation project. This is remarkable as an attempt to re-conceptualize their work, but it also seems to lead to certain misrepresentations of their projects.

The author's competence in the history of political thought is insufficient at some places. It is explicitly in opposition to Skinner's own analysis of the matter to characterize the concept of liberty among the neo-roman thinkers as a "positive" one (p. 148). Koselleck's dissertation *Kritik und Krise* is admittedly indebted to the work of Carl Schmitt, mainly to his *Der Nomos der Erde*, but the critique of the depoliticizing tendencies of the Enlightenment by Koselleck has nothing in common with the Schmittian inability to make the friend-enemy-distinction. On the contrary, Koselleck analyses the fatality of politicization without concrete activities of politics-as-activity or politicking, in which Schmitt never had any interest. I wonder also how Jordheim manages to leave the name of Max Weber unmentioned in the entire volume: Weber's perspective to conceptual changes in humanities as well as his substantial studies on history and politics are obviously significant for all the three authors, especially to Skinner.

More generally, Jordheim has difficulties to understand the inherent links of conceptual histories à la Koselleck and Skinner to politics. As is often the case with the linguistic studies on the history of

concepts and the modes that many representatives of other disciplines use to talk about politics, he seems to assume that it is a more or less well-known subject matter among others. He seems to understand the historicity of the concept of politics, but relying on Sellin's rather point-missing *Politik* article in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (the *Politik* article in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* by Meier, Weihnacht and Vollrath, written a decade later, is much better) has perhaps led him to neglect the conceptual breaks.

Skinner in particular reads political thought in the perspective of "political life", as he programmatically indicates in the *Preface of The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. In other words, politics serves for him as an 'explanatory principle' of conceptual change. Jordheim correctly observes that it is Skinner who has turned the Austinian speech act theory to a strategy of reading (p. 215). This cannot, however, be regarded only as an "application" of a general programme, but it rather signifies a modification of the speech act perspective to concern the analysis of conventions at a historical distance and to treat the illocutionary acts as political "moves in argument".

Despite these strictly 'academic' criticisms, I think Helge Jordheim has written a thought-provoking book, although I am afraid it will be met mostly by silence among the linguistic and philological establishment in Scandinavia. Maybe it is not, finally, so far-fetched to turn the histories of concepts to philologies. Koselleck was an active participant in the discussions of the group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* from 1960's to 1980's. Skinner has published some of his articles in literary journals, such as *New Literary History* and *Essays in Criticism*. Both authors thus tend to question the distinction between the academic and literary genres as sources of historical interpretation.

Most explicitly, to understand conceptual histories as strategies of reading is to extend the possibilities to generate studies unintended by the initiators. This can be particularly done through the analysis of a historical dimension in the use of concepts as arguments in contemporary texts. I have suggested the name of a "lateral history of concepts" to such analysis. In this respect the sources can be poems or party manifestos, novels or parliamentary debates – an interdisciplinary work among scholars of literature and politics in such terms would be highly desirable.