

REVIEW

Begriffsgeschichte According To Gumbrecht – Or: What Meaning Can And Cannot Convey.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht 2006.

Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte.

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In his book *Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte* the German literary scholar Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, working in Stanford, California, says his farewells to *Begriffsgeschichte*, an academic discipline he once practiced, but which now appears to him as a thing of the past, more like a youthful fling, or rather a crush, which since then has long passed. In view of Gumbrecht's last major work, *Production of Presence* from 2004, catapulting him into the league of academic superstars, there is no reason to be overly surprised by this emphatic goodbye. For obvious reasons a scholar who is really trying to pinpoint "what meaning cannot convey", according to the subtitle of his work, is bound to loose interest in *Begriffsgeschichte*, which is, in a very fundamental sense, the study of meaning, or as Hans-Erich Bödeker has put it, "the history of the production of meaning by means of language".¹ Beyond the always rather problematic idea of the *Begriff*, there can be – and indeed there are – vigorous discussions about where this so-called "meaning" is to be found, how it is being constructed and in what ways it is related to its immediate surroundings, people, practices, things or events. However, far from eclips-

ing the question of meaning the reorientation of *Begriffsgeschichte* towards a wider spectrum of possible objects, including metaphors, artworks, actions and technologies, has posed this question in new and more emphatic ways. In recent works, such as the volumes edited by Hans-Erich Bödeker (*Begriffsgeschichte, Diskursgeschichte, Metapherngeschichte*, 2002), Carsten Dutt (*Herausforderungen der Begriffsgeschichte*, 2003) and Ernst Müller (*Begriffsgeschichte im Umbruch*, 2005) there are diverse and often quite imaginative attempts at criticizing and renegotiating the traditional hermeneutical concepts of meaning at work in the tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Gumbrecht, on the other hand, wants to go “Beyond Meaning”, as he puts it in his book on presence, in dialogue with Heidegger and Derrida, but also with Friedrich Kittler and Martin Seel, and, thus, logically he has to leave *Begriffsgeschichte* behind. Effectively, this is what the opening essay of *Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte* is doing; the rest of the book, however, contains a collection of Gumbrecht’s mostly illuminating, although by now slightly dated contributions to several of the multi-volume lexica produced by what he ironically refers to as “the conceptual history movement”. Hence, the volume as such ends up giving a rather schizophrenic impression, begging the question, why Gumbrecht wants to republish as series of articles from a time when he was practicing a kind a history which he now explicitly considers as outdated. For those of us who believe *Begriffsgeschichte* has a future – and considering the number of activities and publications from the last years our numbers seem to be growing – there is every reason to be happy that these mostly well-researched and well-argued essays are being republished. However, for those who believe that *Begriffsgeschichte* has come to a dead end, intellectually as well as historically, there is all the more reason to ignore this book completely. May be somewhat surprisingly, the author himself must be said to belong in the second group.

The introductory essay, which is going to be my main interest here, is entitled “Pyramiden des Geistes. Über den schnellen Aufstieg, die unsichtbaren Dimensionen und das plötzliche Abebben der begriffsgeschichtlichen Bewegung” – or in English: „Pyramids of the Spirit. On the Fast Emergence, the Invisible Dimensions and the Sudden Ebbing-Away of the Conceptual History Movement”. In view of the title there is probably no need to further stress the both ironical and polemical nature of Gumbrecht’s text, which is a feature, even a

trademark of his writing that most of his readers will have learned to recognize and even to appreciate. Furthermore, readers of Gumbrecht will be familiar with his habit of combining biographical and theoretical issues, most consequently practiced in his essays about the figureheads of the illustrious German tradition of Romance scholarship, including Ernst Robert Curtius, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer (*Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten*, 2002). In this case, however, the material for the essay is taken from his own intellectual biography, more precisely, from his own involvement with “the conceptual history movement” of the 1970s and 1980s in Germany: how he was introduced to it, how he experienced it and – not least – the texts he wrote in contribution to it. The point of the whole story is to tell us how he finally became disenchanted with it, or – what seems to amount to the same – why it became irrelevant.

Indeed, there is absolutely no reason to doubt Gumbrecht’s autobiographical knowledge of the practices of *Begriffsgeschichte* in its formative years, having himself contributed to both the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG), the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820* (HGF), the *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft* (RL) and the *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* (ÄG). Reprinted in this volume are his articles on “Modern, Modernität, Moderne”, “Postmoderne”, “Philosophie, Philosophie” (with Rolf Reichardt), “Stil”, “Ausdruck” and “Maß”. However, in spite of his considerable experience and his important contributions it is possible that some of his colleagues might find it a bit disconcerting and even intolerable that he is saying his farewells to *Begriffsgeschichte* not only on behalf of himself, but on their behalf, as well – on behalf of an entire generation: “Was sollen wir heute anfangen mit den in Pyramidenferne gerückten Sedimenten unserer intellektuellen Jugend?” (9) In Gumbrecht’s opinion the disenchantment with *Begriffsgeschichte* is not a personal experience, but a generational one, shared by all those who spent their intellectual prime writing long, complex and empirically loaded articles about political, social or aesthetic concepts, but who have lately – by necessity, he seems to imply – become disenchanted with their own work. Nevertheless, as I started out by saying, we should not let us be taken aback by Gumbrecht’s denouncement of *Begriffsgeschichte*; on the contrary, it is a mere and logical consequence of his shift away from a hermeneutics of meaning to an analytics of presence, which took place in his work from 2004, but which – it seems – had

been prepared a lot earlier, e.g. in his work on “style”. To Gumbrecht, however, this denouncement is not due to his own intellectual preferences or development, but to fundamental changes in world history, or as he puts it, to changes in the “epistemological configuration of our present” (32). Hence, in Gumbrecht’s opinion the “ebbing-out” of *Begriffsgeschichte* – for which his own disenchantment seems to be the only evidence – should be seen as a symptom of a “new epistemological environment” (ibid.), in which “certain conditions for the conceptual history movement” (ibid.) have disappeared. Obviously, this is a really strong claim to make based solely on personal experience, but it also makes the essay, and even the book worth reading – especially when Gumbrecht moves on to claim that his own previously published articles on different concepts can be seen as keys to understanding this very epistemological shift.

To understand Gumbrecht’s almost Gibsonian idea of the decline and fall of *Begriffsgeschichte* we have to start by taking a quick look at what he refers to as the “methodological ‘preparation’” as well as the “‘invisible’, pre- or half-conscious *dimensions*” (10) of the discipline. In Gumbrecht’s opinion the context of origin of *Begriffsgeschichte* in all its different versions, philosophical, political and aesthetical, was the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer, summed up in the famous slogan: “Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache” (17). However, all three lexica, the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (HWP), GG and ÄG, had their difficulties in coming to terms with this Gadamerian inheritance, for different reasons. Furthermore, in the attempts to cope with these difficulties decisions were made, in a more or less conscious and explicit way, which proved to be fateful for the future of the entire discipline, even anticipating its imminent and unavoidable end.

For Joachim Ritter and the editorial board of the HWP the problem, according to Gumbrecht, was *das Unsagbare*, oder, more in line with the present terminology, *das Unbegreifliche*, that which cannot be conceptualized. Effectively ignoring the possibilities presented to them by Gadamer in the preface to the second edition of *Wahrheit und Methode*, in which *das Unsagbare* is turned into an aspect of the universality of conversation and hence of language, Ritter and the other editors made a firm stance against everything non-conceptual, thus excluding the whole field of metaphors, which had recently been described and analyzed in a brilliant way by

one of the other seminal intellectual figures of the time, Hans Blumenberg, in his *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* (1960). Gumbrecht writes: "Jenes Sein, das nicht zur Sprache wird und auch nicht zur Sprache werden kann, hatte die Begriffsgeschichte zunächst programmatisch ausgeschlossen, und im Lauf der Zeit scheint sich diese Entscheidung zu einem irreversiblen Habitus verhärtet zu haben" (30).

In the case of *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, Gumbrecht continues, history, more precisely, German history caught up with it. In the preparatory volume, published in 1990, but still with "Deutsche Demokratische Republik" in the impressum, any possible suspicions of idealism are effectively fended off by a strictly materialist definition of the *Begriff*: "nothing immediately linguistic, [...] not signs", but something the editors refer to as "memory property", "Gedächtnisbesitz; [...] intermodal zugänglich" (25). Even though the first actual volume of the lexicon, published in 2000, had no such definition of the *Begriff*, the materialist framework lives on in the rejection of the "hermeneutic search for meaning" (26) as a symptom of the threatening irrelevance and the esotericism of the human sciences. Instead the lexicon gives priority to the original meaning of *aisthesis* as "sense impression" (ibid.) That a fundamentally hermeneutic project in this way rejects its own origins within the hermeneutic tradition can, in Gumbrecht's opinion, only be seen as a symptom of the completely untimely character of *Begriffsgeschichte* at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. For *Begriffsgeschichte* there seems to be no way out of the hermeneutic trap which Gumbrecht has set for it. At the beginning of the "conceptual history movement" *das Unsagbare* was excluded, in an act of 'original sin', and any attempts to bring it back in, in the form of either metaphors or sense impressions, is deemed to fail. But what about the GG? What went wrong here? Again, what interests Gumbrecht, is the attempt of *Begriffsgeschichte* to move beyond the *Begriff*, beyond language, in the Gadamerian, universalist sense, in direction of something other, closer to the real – which, as already mentioned, is also Gumbrecht's own ambition in *Production of Presence*. In the case of the GG to move beyond language, meaning and interpretation meant to approach historical reality, in terms of social structures and political conflicts, in other words, to move from *Begriffsgeschichte* to *Sachgeschichte*. Even though Koselleck

always insisted on the reference to the real, to the *Sache*, he refused to consider language as something ontologically secondary and subsidiary; on the contrary, in all his theoretical texts he continued searching for ways of expressing the complete interdependence of language and reality: In two of his most famous phrases he describes the *Begriff* as a “convergence between language and history” and as “both indicator and factor of historical change”.² It is possible to claim that exactly this theoretical stance, which Gumbrecht refers to as an “*indecisiveness with regard to the problem of linguistic reference*” (27), refusing to give priority either to language or to reality, but insisting on exploring their complex and historically shifting relationship, represents one of the most important and original contributions of the project of the GG. To a certain point even Gumbrecht can agree, stressing, again from a biographical point of view, how Koselleck’s openness to new questions and interdisciplinary perspectives as well as the difficulties in finding conceptually coherent answers proved to be “productive” (20). Nevertheless, to Gumbrecht these very questions illustrate how *Begriffsgeschichte* emerged from a set of epistemological presuppositions that have now become all but obsolete.

As a conclusion to this part of the article, Gumbrecht proceeds to show how these “hidden dimensions” of *Begriffsgeschichte* amounts to what he, with reference to Anselm Haverkamp, calls the “*Habitus eines ‘Latenthaltens’ der nationalen Geschichte*” (30). In the monumental works of *Begriffsgeschichte*, he argues, the traumas of the German past in the 20th century are not confronted and not “brought to rest” (*ibid.*), but temporarily suppressed by the attempts to reintegrate German history and culture in the Western tradition. According to Gumbrecht, one example of this tendency is Koselleck’s extremely influential ideas of *Neuzeit* and *Sattelzeit*, which presupposed a common European past to be investigated across national and cultural borders. In his study of the concept “revolution”, Gumbrecht observes, Koselleck analyzes both the formation of the concept to a *Kollektivsingular* and the temporal logic of acceleration inherent in the concept; what he leaves out, however, is the German history of the first half of the 20th century and thus the entire issue of the *deutsche Revolution* of National Socialism. Far from a symptom of ideological forgetfulness, at least in the case of Koselleck, this, in Gumbrecht’s opinion, represents an unwanted and unrecognized consequence of the theory and practice

of *Begriffsgeschichte*, not confronting the national traumas, but keeping them latent, putting them 'on hold', so to speak.

Obviously, Gumbrecht is moving on very thin ice here, and he knows it – especially as one of the explicit ambitions of the GG was to explore the conditions of a new German political language in the wake of the *Stunde Null*, exposing the semantic layers, the meanings and uses, which were favoured by the National Socialists, in an act of linguistic exorcism. To reintegrate German concepts in the European democratic tradition was one obvious way of doing this. Once more, however, Gumbrecht's problem is with the concepts as such, or, more precisely, the exclusion of non-conceptual, non-linguistic experiences from the study of the German past. Again quoting Haverkamp, Gumbrecht argues that "the exclusion of being without language [*des sprachlosen Seins*] presented the generation of Germans who had taken part in the war with a comfortable way of coming to terms with the German past" (30). To prove his point, Gumbrecht recounts how he was present in Bad Homburg during a seminar in the working group "Poetik und Hermeneutik" in the middle of the 1970s when Koselleck presented the outline for his article "Terror und Traum" about temporal experiences in the Third Reich. Studying protocols of the dreams of German Jews in the early years of National Socialist rule and in the concentration camps he had found that the slimmer their chances were of surviving, the more they dreamt of happiness and salvation. In this study, Gumbrecht argues, the ambition of a linguistically and semantically achieved reconciliation with the past had reached its limit, because there was no way that the experiences of the victims could be assimilated into the horizon of understanding of the later generation. Koselleck himself recognized this and spoke of the need to approach this material "synchronically", "in its uniqueness", "not only *post eventum*, but in *eventum*"; the reaction of his colleagues, however, as Gumbrecht remembers it, was one of "angry and nervous refusal" (31).

Indeed, Gumbrecht's article is full of such moments of real, but often paradoxical insight, but his reactions to these insights are always of the same kind: Instead of discussing how these inconsistencies or ruptures could serve to open up *Begriffsgeschichte* to other objects and new theoretical and methodological approaches, he insists on seeing them as signs predicting the end of the "conceptual history movement" as well as the rise of a new paradigm within the human sciences, beyond

meaning and interpretation. To understand this shift he turns to his own contributions to *Begriffsgeschichte*, his texts on “Modern”, “Postmodern”, “Philosophie”, “Stil”, “Ausdruck” und “Maß”, to see if they might help him “to understand the rapid downfall of the conceptual history movement” (32). Unsurprisingly, they do. Personally, I have never come across another scholarly text in which the solipsistic and the epochal are brought to such a complete convergence. Thus, the “ebbing-out” of the interest in meaning and interpretation is a process which can be observed in the life and work of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, but which he then projects onto the history of *Begriffsgeschichte* and even the human sciences at large.

Indeed, there is nothing really new in Gumbrecht’s description of the “epistemological configuration of the present”, dominated by a new conception of time as well as a new relationship to reality. Re-reading his articles on “Modern, Modernität” and “Postmodern” he concludes that “the postmodern” must be seen as “a symptom for the collapse of those conditions and topoi, by which the historical time of modernity had unfolded” (32). Thus, the temporality of modernity, that is, time and acceleration as factors of historical change, has come to a standstill in the “broad present [*breite Gegenwartigkeit*] of the postmodern” (33). In this chronotope, Gumbrecht adds, the future is closed to all plans, hopes, and predictions, whereas the past has become ever-present. The postmodern is “a zone of simultaneities”, “a broad and complex present containing all pasts and refusing the future” (33). Hence, Gumbrecht claims, the fundamental hermeneutic ambition of *Begriffsgeschichte*, to mediate between the past and the present, in the spirit of Gadamer’s idea of the *Überlieferungsgeschehen*, has lost its intellectual *raison d’être*. Similarly, the conflict between constructivism and “a new philosophical realism” (35) has been radicalized to point where the position favoured by the theorists of *Begriffsgeschichte*, primarily Koselleck, not opting for either language or reality, but insisting on their convergence, has become all but untenable. To explain how this new “epistemological configuration” came about, Gumbrecht returns to his own articles, in chronological succession, and outlines how the loss of an outside position, similar to the one occupied by the *philosophes* of the 18th century (“Philosophie, Philosophie”), in the all-encompassing present of the postmodern led to a reorientation of the modern subject towards itself and its ways of personal expression (“Ausdruck”), of self-finding and self-fashioning

("Stil"). Finally, in reaction to this sprawling subjectivity and individualism a need for a new objectivity and commitment has emerged – for "Maß" – leading to a new realism in epistemological matters as opposed to the subjectivist constructivism (33-34).

There we are then – the intellectual history of the last fifty years or so, on less than two pages, with no other material than Gumbrecht's own articles, explaining to us why *Begriffsgeschichte* is about to disappear. If there is anything in this astonishing synopsis really worth paying attention to, it is what Gumbrecht says about time, and about the "broad present" as a "zone of simultaneity", which also draws on the two most interesting texts in the collection, on the concepts of "the modern" and "the postmodern". In several of his essays Koselleck comes back to the idea that *Begriffsgeschichte* cannot function without *eine Theorie der historischen Zeiten*, "a theory of historical times".³ However, at the beginning of the 21st century, Gumbrecht argues, this theory cannot be anything but the theory of an exceptionally "broad present" in which the future never comes and the past never goes away, and for this reason, he concludes, the whole idea of writing histories of concepts has completely lost its meaning. Well, has it really? It is quite possible to make the opposite argument – that it has never been more important to pay attention to how the words we use carry with them past meanings and at the same time make gestures towards an unpredictable future than in the context of a "broad", all-encompassing present, a highly ideological and politicized illusion of simultaneity. To relate to the present uncritically as "a zone of simultaneity" means to ignore the non-simultaneous lives, experiences, events and meanings, *die Ungleichzeitigkeiten*, which to an ever greater extent is assimilated into an economical, technological and communicative simultaneity. And we only ignore them at our peril, or the peril of others. To a certain extent, Gumbrecht is right in pointing out that *Begriffsgeschichte* is concerned with the mediation between past and present; just as important, however, is the possibility of exposing the possible contradictions and conflicts between different temporal layers, *Zeitschichten*, at work in particular concepts or particular discourses at the same time, and thus showing how the present is never really just the present, in terms of an absolute and infinite simultaneity, but always, as Koselleck puts it, carries "a Janus-head", also facing the past and the future. Finally, to access this complex system of temporal and semantic layers, there is only one way to proceed: to continue ask-

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ing questions about meaning. Indeed, the questions might be new and better, the answers as well, but the object of the questions remains the same: what meaning *can* convey.

NOTES

1. Hans Erich Bödeker (ed.): *Begriffsgeschichte, Diskursgeschichte, Metapherngeschichte*, Göttingen: Wallstein 2002, p. 14.
2. Reinhart Koselleck: "Einleitung", in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck. Volume 1, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1972, p. XXIII.
3. Koselleck: „Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft“, in Koselleck: *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*. Mit einem Beitrag von Hans-Georg Gadamer, Suhrkamp Verlag: Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 302.