II

CONTENTIOUS CONCEPTS

Introduction

The Social Life of Contentious Concepts

Ronald S. Stade

■ **ABSTRACT:** Concepts have cultural biographies and social lives. Some concepts become social and political keywords that can be both indicative of and instrumental in social and political conflicts. (It might even be possible to speak of conceptual violence.) But they are not just contentious; they also tend to be contested. Contentious and contested concepts have been studied by historians and social scientists from varying temporal and spatial horizons. It is a research area that lends itself to cross-disciplinary approaches, as is demonstrated in the three contributions to this section, the first of which investigates the Russian obsession with the concept of "Europe." The second contribution to the section explores the military roots of the concept of "creative thinking," and the final contribution examines the social life of "political correctness" as a fighting word.

■ **KEYWORDS:** conceptual history, contested concepts, semantic discontinuity, social life approach

In the 1930s and 1940s, the German philologist Victor Klemperer recorded and analyzed the language of the Third Reich, the *lingua tertii imperii* or LTI, as he half-jokingly called it (in reference to the Nazis' predilection for acronyms). In his notes, which were published soon after World War II, Klemperer (1947) wrote that the linguistic style and tropes used by the Nazis were indicative of things to come even before Hitler had seized power. What did Klemperer find particular about the Nazi language? The Nazis used a declamatory style not just in speech but also in writing, were fond of superlatives, and made martial expressions like *kämpferisch* ("full of fighting spirit"), *heldenhaft* ("heroic"), and *fanatisch* ("fanatic") part of the German vernacular.[1] Erasing the difference between official and private style and tropes was a step in what the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung,* the enforced ideological conformity of each and every person in Germany. Thus, LTI was not just indicative of Nazism; it was also instrumental in its formation and part of its violent practice. (It might even be possible to speak of conceptual violence.)

Klemperer's approach can be extended to the systematic study of political concepts more generally: certain political concepts are both indicative of and instrumental in historical change.

They are often polemical (from the ancient Greek *polemikós,* "of or for war") in that they are directed against what is perceived as an existing order. In this sense, they refer both to the present and to the future (Koselleck 1979: 111). A number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have conducted research on the history of social and political key concepts, among them historians like Reinhart Koselleck (2002) and Quentin Skinner (1969),[2] cultural studies scholars like Raymond Williams (1983), anthropologists like David Parkin (1978) and Talal Asad (2003), and sociologists like Margaret Somers (1995). The most systematic and ambitious project, to date, in this type of research, is the encyclopedia of social and political key concepts *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe,* which took 25 years to prepare and which encompasses more than nine thousand pages in eight volumes (Brunner et al. 2004). The encyclopedia was meant to serve the same purpose for historiography, as had long-term ethnographic fieldwork for anthropology: to relativize and contextualize cultural meanings. In early historiography, presentism, that is, reading concepts through the lens of contemporary meanings, had been as widespread as ethnocentrism in proto-anthropology. Conceptual history was conceived as a cure for presentism.[3] Although the entries in the encyclopedia are about key concepts in German, more often than not, authors apply longer historical, as well as comparative, perspectives and consider concepts in major European languages other than German. The source material for *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* tends to be canonical rather than popular, consisting of academic treatises rather than *Groschenromane* ("penny dreadfuls"), as it were. The same can be said of the Cambridge School of intellectual history and the history of political thought, represented by scholars like Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, Peter Laslett, John Dunn, David Runciman, and Raymond Geuss. Just like its German counterpart, the Cambridge School is both historicist and social scientific.

The reliance on canonical sources has been amended in subsequent research projects, like the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820* (see Reichardt 1985), global conceptual history (see Pernau and Sachsenmaier 2016, part 3), and words in motion (see Gluck and Lowenhaupt Tsing 2009). In particular, the latter two projects bridge the gap between conceptual history and anthropology. Whereas conceptual history in the vein of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe,* the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820,* and the Cambridge School, are manifestly centered on Europe, perhaps even Eurocentric, the global conceptual history and words in motion projects extend conceptual research to non-European languages. They investigate the social life and cultural biography of concepts like *ustaarabu* ("civilization" in Swahili), *adat* ("indigenous" in Indonesian), and *aqalliyya* ("minority" in Arabic). Anthropology's global approach meets conceptual history's well-developed methodology. Common issues like historical discontinuity, cultural translation, and cultural diffusion come into focus. The relationship between anthropology and conceptual history is, however, asymmetrical.

While historians like Koselleck and Skinner not only conduct close studies of empirical data but also engage systematically with the philosophical and methodological aspects of conceptual change, the same cannot be said of anthropologists. This is unfortunate, as anthropologists are in an excellent position to contribute to the development of theoretical and methodological models that are grounded in their study of semantic discontinuity in action.[4] Two types of semantic discontinuity can be studied: diachronic and synchronic. Diachronic discontinuity implies that the meaning of a concept changes over time. Long-term and historically informed fieldwork provides opportunities to research this type of semantic discontinuity. Synchronic discontinuity refers to the fact that a concept can have different meanings at the same time. The skilled fieldworker knows the language spoken by her interlocutors and is thus able to discern alternative interpretations of social and political keywords. Needless to say, diachronic discon-

tinuity is the outcome of synchronic discontinuity, so the study of conceptual contestation is a good start if one wants to understand semantic change.

In the twentieth century, generations of anthropologists purged both kinds of semantic discontinuity from their ethnographies. Their ambition was to present unambiguous cultural meanings for the sake of creating images of integrated, homogeneous cultures. This made it necessary to disambiguate concepts. A well-known ethnographic example is how Clifford Geertz (1973) used the Balinese word *lek* to decode Balinese culture. *Lek* is usually translated as "embarrassed," "shy," or "bashful," but Geertz suggested it should be translated as suffering from stage fright because Balinese culture, he alleged, could be likened to an intricate theater performance. Geertz's condensation of actual lives lived by others into a trope (theatrical performance), for which a single concept, *lek*, could serve as a psychological key to unlock "Balinese culture,"[5] is emblematic of an anthropological tradition that largely has gone out of favor. Unfortunately, long-term fieldwork involving social immersion also seems on the decline, partly for practical reasons (it has become increasingly difficult to obtain funds to conduct this kind of research; doctoral students tend to be older than before and might have to consider the wishes and needs of children and partners), partly for theoretical reasons (if cultures in Geertz's sense do not exist, there is no need to immerse oneself over a long time for the sake of producing thick descriptions of specific cultures). As already mentioned, however, social immersion and learning a language are necessary to understand the meanings of concepts and to realize that the meaning of key concepts tends to be contested and how concepts are instrumentalized in political conflicts. Different people—or, rather, groups of people—interpret social and political key concepts differently. Such semantic discontinuity is likely to issue from their social and political significance—that is, only those words and concepts will be contested that are of consequence.[6] Anthropologists are able to make direct observations in social situations where contentious concepts are used in altercations and concepts are contested. They are in a position to not just witness the effects of speech acts but also to record different definitions and interpretations of key concepts and to place their observations and recordings in historical context and thus contribute to conceptual history.

The three contributions in this section are not examples of long immersive fieldwork in a village or remote province. They belong to a genre that straddles several disciplinary boundaries—conceptual history, political anthropology, cultural sociology, peace and conflict studies, international relations, and so on—and is consigned to a sort of academic exile. The authors are grateful to the editors for giving their manuscripts sanctuary. In the first article, Iver Neumann investigates the Russian obsession with the concept of "Europe." His study covers the period from 1991 to 2016. This period in Russian history, like previous ones, has seen an oscillation between Russian attempts to emulate Europe and Russian strategies of defining Europe as the Other that can be used to construct a contrastive self-identity. Neumann concludes by suggesting that the current anti-European, anti-Western language is likely to be superseded by a restored orientation toward Europe and the West.

Bregje van Eekelen explores how the trope of "creative thinking" emerged in the United States in the context of the Cold War. As the Soviet enemy developed nuclear weapons and launched Sputnik, "thinking outside the box" and "thinking the unthinkable" became guiding concepts in US military circles. Today, creative thinking seems like an innocent enough commonplace in addition to being at the core of an entire industry. The military origin of this industry, however, tends to be either forgotten or concealed.

Ronald Stade gives an account of the conceptual history and social life of "political correctness." Just like Neumann and Van Eekelen, he studies a concept in motion, thereby illuminating its political and social context, as well as its tropological quality. The latter focus clarifies when

and under what circumstances in its social life the concept of political correctness was used ironically. Stade concludes by discussing the fate of political correctness in the current historical situation, characterized as it is by an invigorated fascism.

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▪ NOTES

1. It is easy to recognize the recurrence of this style and equivalent tropes in today's right-wing rhetoric. I think it is therefore reasonable to speak of contemporary right-wing radicalism as Fascism 2.0.
2. Koselleck is associated with the school of *Begriffsgeschichte*; Skinner together with J.G.A. Pocock, Terence Ball, James Farr, and others are referred to as the Cambridge School, whose members study political language in historical perspective (see, e.g., Ball et al. 1989; on the relationship between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the Cambridge School, see Richter 1990).
3. In this regard, conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) pursued the same objective as, for example, *l'histoire des mentalités* and historical anthropology.
4. My own attempt at this has been to develop a model of global concept chains (see Stade 2014).
5. If one follows Geertz's argument, however, it appears as though he first came up with the "social life as theatrical performance" metaphor and then took *lek* to be a synonym for stage fright.
6. This, of course, is a reference to Gallie's (1956) thesis of "essentially contested concepts."

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