

Book Review

REDESCRIBING POLITICAL CONCEPTS: HISTORY OF CONCEPTS AND POLITICS

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Kari Palonen. *Die Entzauberung Der Begriffe. Das Umschreiben Der Politischen Begriffe Bei Quentin Skinner Und Reinhart Koselleck.* Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003.

In order to understand Kari Palonen's last book one must begin from its ending. In the book's last section the author provides an in-depth explanation of the thesis that guides the theoretical reconstruction produced in the first three hundred and fifty pages composing this volume. Two of the propositions contained in the end section are advanced rather radically: on one side the necessity to value the historiographical and "methodological" contributions by Skinner and Koselleck as fundamental to set in course a decisive movement of "de-essentializing" the categories commonly used in political analysis; on the other, the possibility, enabled by the critical recognition of such paradigms, of going beyond these concepts by tracing a new perspective regarding what politics effectively is.

The disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of concepts and political discourse, in Kari Palonen's view, as well as in Skinner's and Koselleck's, operate as a necessary preliminary to a correct approach to historical sources, whose consequence would be to free concepts from the spell that binds them to the transmission lines whereby the history of ideas traditionally fashions its narratives of continuity. Furthermore, this approach would also serve as a privileged access route for an interpretation of politics in which the aspects of contingency and mobility are conceived as decisive.

It is not simply the case of Palonen adopting a Weberian term in reference to Skinner and Koselleck and applying it only to a very precise reconstruction of their work, as this had already been done in one of Palonen's pre-

vious works.¹ If in *Das 'Webersche Moment'* Palonen defined the “Weberian moment” of politics (also identifying J. G. A. Pocock as one of the authors who adopts this theoretical stance), he now resorts to Weber in order to trace a more general conceptualization of the political having contingency as the constitutive characteristic of this form of action.

Politics, modern politics in particular, which is supposedly based on what Nietzsche described as the death of God and the subsequent downfall of foundations and values, appears to be integrally linked to the clash between conflicting possibilities. It is therefore non-neutralizable either through procedural or technical means.

In *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe* Palonen again relies on Weber to identify the emergence of a thinking on contingency soon to inform an entire age of philosophical speculation on politics, as testified, in his own words, by the works of authors as diverse as Schmitt, Plessner, Arendt, Benjamin, Sartre or Oakeshott. The autonomy of politics, its richness, refers directly to the interior of the “Weberian moment” which, in Palonen’s interpretation, can be isolated in the Western tradition as a non-neutralizable contingency of action, as a syntax of change, transformation, and possibility.

The Weberian “inexhaustibility of reality” renders the argumentative structures of a politology structurally inoperative, or, at least drastically regressive, as Palonen calls it following Weber. The Weberian analysis brings to light a concept of the political whose categorical profiles remain nominally linked to the finitude of action, in other words, a *Beruf* of the political, or of the objectivity of social sciences. Politics is openness to the possible: *Möglichkeit* is more real than reality because it is not subordinated to any particular normativity since it is irrevocably connected to the contingency (not deficiency, not a gap, but full potency) of action.

This argumentative scheme becomes the backdrop of Palonen’s new book. The theoretical writings of Skinner and Koselleck enter stage to call attention to the issues still worth keeping unresolved in the critical confrontation among the “*entpolitisiertenden*,” essentialist, foundationalist, and normative tendencies found in contemporary political science (from communitarianism to neo-contractualism, from the hegemony of analytical philosophy exercised by English-speaking political science to the explicit penchant of the theory of communicative action for stability) and to strengthen a historical perspective based on temporalization that constitutionally keeps concepts and categories in tension.

In Quentin Skinner's own writings there are references to the performative function of language. Referring to Austin and Searle and in accordance to Wittgenstein, Skinner adopts the theory of linguistic acts as a means for interpreting discourse capable of preserving its aspect of concrete action. According to Skinner, to interpret a political text – and little does it matter if a “classic” is at hand or if it is an anonymous intervention in the living irreducibility of linguistic-communicative exchange – is to figure out what the subject, who was expressing himself through it, actually meant and did.

This leads us away from the methodological perspective of the history of ideas, and the very idea of the text's transcendent “meaning” as the axis around which the normative hypotheses of political theory turns, toward the possibility of thinking politics taking into account the many modalities of action that language brings to expression. Politics coincides with a concrete form of action; the words (vocabulary) and argumentative forms of which it is made of, along with strategic discourse, make it impossible to think that the problem of conflicting interpretations can be considered solved. Language expresses, directly and without leaving anything aside, the political nature of humankind, its intrinsically linguistic and conflicting nature.

Palonen studies this choice of method in Skinner's historical work, which has focused on the identification of a specific neo-Roman tradition of republicanism, in his theoretical work, and also in his recent research on the reception and transformation of classical rhetoric. Under the guise of the rhetorical figure of *paradiastole* (redescription), Skinner recovers the modes of a concrete subversion/redescription of the *topoi* of discourse whereby he identifies the dynamic traits of political communication and its constant renovation, which renders argumentative structures subordinated to the speaker. Skinner traces in this, beyond the hypothesis of authorship, the true subjectivity of the political. Through redescription, concepts, legitimacy arrangements, and modes of discourse that are traditional become adapted to the specific strategic objectives pursued by the author, whose argumentative machine sets in motion a system of coordinated contingencies it helps establish.

This brings us to the question of comparing Skinner and Koselleck. For as much as Palonen argues in favor of integrating their methodologies, both are in fact unsuitable for a theory of history. However, there remains a tension caused by Koselleck's assumption that politics is a process of constant temporalization of experience. In the second part of the book, Palonen

submits Koselleck's oeuvre (historical works, methodological writings, articles, reviews) to the same careful scrutiny bestowed to Skinner in the previous section, highlighting common elements that bind both authors together: the history of concepts, categories for a new "Historik", a geology of time layers identifiable in the Western political lexicon – all of which cooperate in Koselleck's endeavor to denaturalize chronology and de-essentialize political theory.

It is not accidental that Palonen highlights in Koselleck's work the effects of mutation and change that, he says, define the evolutionary line of the Western political lexicon. According to Koselleck's view, history appears only when temporalization becomes part of the experience of the world and thus causes a shift in the horizon of expectation in relation to the space of experience, in such a way they no longer coincide. Political concepts become historicized as indicators – and as material factors – of change, and thus assign a specifically historical quality to the human experience of time. In this way, collective action gains consistency and politicality – the former because collective action becomes subordinated to the nature and structure of repetition, and the latter because it also becomes marked by the dynamic and always debatable aspect of conceptual definition.

This is what Palonen believes to be so relevant about Koselleck's latest work.² De-naturalization and differentiation are the factors Koselleck considers decisive in the temporalization and politicization of experience. According to Palonen, to study the history of concepts does not mean to defend a political lexicon historically reconstructed and recomposed beyond its crisis, but to truly assume transformation and crisis as the revealing elements of the specific quality of politics, in order to open the theory to a field in which the lines separating natural law and universal normativity can be definitively erased or removed.

Through his conception of the specific "politology of time" (*Politologie der Zeit*),³ which assumes the contingency of action and the immanent plurality of positions and definitions inherent to the conflictive character of interpretations, Palonen moves beyond Skinner and Koselleck. The methodological paradigms of the history of concepts and of historiography, in Palonen's formulation, are able to recover the instances that rebuild political theory according to the dynamics of constant redescription that constitutes its history. Political confrontation, with its inherently non-neutralizable conflictive character, immanent temporality of contestation and refutation, and perma-

nent semantic and rhetorical redefinitions, must be assumed in Weberian terms as the stage of an inexhaustible polytheism of values in which different positions in regard to power and action elaborate strategies to conquer the world of collective praxis.

The constellation of politics for Palonen is in constant fibrillation – it possesses a dynamic of its own. In order to capture it, political science (or the science of politics) must adapt itself to definition profiles variable at the historical perspective and to rhetorical temporalizing practices without essentializing contents, concepts, and categories. Once de-essentialized, contents, concepts, and categories become simple products of action; at the same time, elements of organization and semantic indicators of action and its temporal evolution. They cannot be thought of as if – and this is Palonen's main underlying thesis – they were not connected to the concrete dynamics that is always prior to and follow from innovation and change.

NOTES

- ¹ Kari Palonen (1998).
- ² Reinhart Koselleck (2000).
- ³ Kari Palonen (2003), 310.

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