

# What is Conceptual History?

By Anders Hassing

The word *school* originates from the ancient Greek *schola* meaning free time. 'Free time' is the original meaning of 'school'. What does that tell us about today's school system? Not much, most pupils would probably agree! But the difference between the meanings of the two terms is telling about how different the society of ancient Greece is from our own.

## Key concepts and layers of meaning

The method of conceptual history aims at studying societies of the past and social change by examining how key social and political concepts change their meanings over time. Conceptual history therefore is an approach to the study of history where the analysis of language is used in the study of social relations and social conditions of the past. One could also say that linguistic analysis is the *tool* and society is the *object* of inquiry. In practice that often means investigating the past by focusing on one central social concept, also termed a *key historical concept*. Examples of key historical concepts are words like 'society', 'democracy', 'family', 'work' and 'politics'.

You can think of the historian of concepts like a geologist digging in layers of dirt. When the historian of concepts digs into the language of the past, she uncovers new layers of words or rather, *layers of meaning* left behind in processes of historical change. We can illustrate the layers of meaning in figure 1.

Figure 1. The layers of meaning of a concept

Present meaning
Previous meaning
Past meaning

The point is, that the meaning of a key concept from a specific period opens a window into the historical society from which it stems.

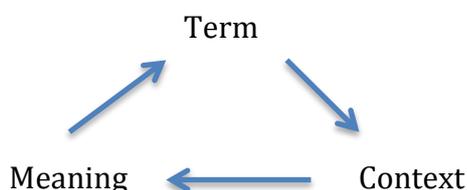
## Analysing the history of concepts

If we want to know the meaning of a word today we can consult a dictionary or another work of reference. The past meaning of concepts can be more obscure. Sometimes we may locate the answer in old dictionaries or encyclopaedias, but often we will not be able to look it up right away. As historians of concepts, however, what we are looking for is not a narrow history of the word (etymology) anyway because our aim is to understand wider historical change, that is shifting political, social, cultural and economic relations. Our focus is on the interconnectivity of conceptual and social change.

We can illustrate the relation between concepts and society in figure 2. The *term* is the specific word we use to denote the concept. For example, *democracy* can bare various labels like popular, majority, or mob rule depending on time, place and political inclination. But in any case what we are talking about is the *concept of democracy*. More interesting though, is often it's meaning, that is how we perceive and define the concept. In order to decode the

meaning we need to understand the historical setting in which the concept is situated. We need to examine the political, social, economic and cultural *context*.

Figure 2. Analysing the history of a concept



### **The concept of democracy - an example**

The Weimar Republic ('the term' denominating the first democratic German state existing from the end of the First World War in 1918 until it was destroyed by Hitler in 1933) was a great disappointment for many Germans living through the experiences of the interwar period. Coinciding with the construction of the democratic polity was also fierce economic, social and political crises and an atmosphere racked by cultural and psychological traumas of The Great War. For that reason democracy was perceived as an inefficient political system unable to offer ordinary people security, dignity and a satisfying way of life. The concept of democracy took meaning from its historical context. The Nazis actively pursued that aim, but their success cannot be explained alone by the rhetorical skills of Hitler or the Nazi street thug's use of threats and violence, even though both factors made their significant contributions. Adding to the context was the defeat in The First World War, a humiliating peace agreement, a global economic crisis with devastating impact on Germany, fear of the communists in the German middle class, lack of a democratic political tradition in the country and many other factors. The context gives meaning to the concept. When, however, the concept has assumed a specific connotation, it frames the context as well. When democracy has become synonymous with impotent mockery, treason and crisis it becomes very hard to argue in favour of that political system and people may stop imagining democracy as a relevant political option.

But how in practice do we examine the interaction between concepts and society when we may not even be able to find contemporary definitions?

### **Focus on opposites**

Many common concepts are actually hard to give a precise definition. What is for example the genuinely 'feminine'? Well, it is certainly conceived as the direct opposite to 'masculinity'. What is the true essence of our national culture? It can be difficult to draw a hard line of demarcation but we assume that it is unlike the 'alien cultures' of other nations. Many concepts simply cannot be defined in an unequivocal way. But it is characteristic that they draw meaning from their being different from what they most certainly are not. This is what we also call *counter concepts*.

When undertaking analyses of the history of concepts it will therefore often be fruitful to examine which opposites the concept implies. The German historian of concepts Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) considered a number of opposites relevant to pay attention to (figure

3)

*Figure 3. Opposites*

Concept/counter concept  
Inside/outside  
Friend/enemy  
Above/below  
Before/after

Returning to the concept of democracy we find its opposite to be dictatorship. In different historical circumstances, however, different counter concepts have been prevalent (western democracy has for example been contrasted to fascism (a. 1922-1945), Communism (a. 1917-1991), and Islamic theocracy (a. 1978-?).

The counter concept establishes the meaning of the concept. Following this we can examine who are considered 'inside' and 'outside' the concept. In our example, who are considered legitimate participants in the democracy and who are excluded? Who holds the right to vote and who does not?

Accentuating the opposites we can consider who counts for friends and foes. Who are the enemies of democracy and who are considered as its defenders? Is the concept conceived as threatened, and if so by whom?

It will also be relevant to examine the concepts' inner pecking order. Who ranks above and below each other in the democracy of our chosen context? Who rules, and over whom? How are the roles cast between the concerned parties? What are the procedures for election?

Finally it may be relevant to examine whether the concept implies a certain conception of time, that is a 'before and after'. Christianity is based on a narrative of the Fall from Paradise and the return by Salvation. This is the story of a lost, ancient condition, which will be regained on Judgement Day. The Nazis termed their German state The Third Reich (realm) tracing their lineage to the Holy Roman Empire (962-1806) and The German Monarchy (1871-1918). But even key concepts of our contemporary age operate on a conception of time. Many people will for example emphasize democracy as the political system of Modernity surpassing more primitive systems still found other places in the world, which in turn often are considered to 'resemble the middle ages'.

### **Contesting concepts**

As we see, the meanings of concepts are neither fixed in time nor space and their value may vary greatly in different historical circumstances. This variation can be the result of gradual and almost indiscernible historical changes, or it may be the outcome of intentional political interventions. Hitler invented the epithet The Weimar Republic as a negative counter concept to the term *Reich*, the latter referring to the period before 1914 with progress, national euphoria and authoritarian rule. This underlines how understanding the differences and struggles over definitions is of crucial political importance. It is as much the case today as it was in the turbulent interwar years and the subsequent human catastrophe.

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