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Empire, imperialism and conceptual history

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Hierarchy in world politics has to be discussed by means of specific concepts. Concepts come with specific historical and social baggage. They are defined by their meanings and uses and become powerful in battle with other concepts. The concepts discussed in this article, 'empire' and 'imperialism', have lately made their return to the grand stage of world politics, most significantly as descriptions, and indeed, self-descriptions of the role and position of the US. How is this return possible? What does it mean? To answer these questions we draw on the long-standing scientific discipline and method of conceptual history, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, in the way it has been theorized and practiced by the German historian and theorist of history Reinhart Koselleck. In a second step, we discuss how this way of writing the history of social and political concepts have been challenged by other approaches, most importantly by the Cambridge intellectual historian Quentin Skinner. At the hands of Koselleck and Skinner conceptual history contributes to opening our eyes to the historical specificity of the uses and meanings of concepts in particular contexts, in a long historical perspective ranging from the Ancient Romans to the Bush administration.

Keywords: empire; imperialism; conceptual history; Reinhart Koselleck; Quentin Skinner; US foreign policy; Russian history

Empire, imperialism and conceptual history

According to a much-quoted phrase by the Cambridge historian J.G.A. Pocock, 'men cannot do what they have no means of saying they have done; and what they do must in part be what they can say and conceive that it is' (Pocock 1972: 122). Like anything else, hierarchy in world politics has to be discussed by means of specific concepts. Concepts come with specific historical and social baggage. They are defined by their meanings and uses and become powerful in battle with other concepts. Some basic concepts are capable of altering our world view. We need to know the history and usages of these basic concepts in order to understand crucial political, cultural, and social relations both in the past and the present. Since concepts are constitutive of political positions, the use of certain concepts rather than others will in and of itself be political. The study of concepts takes us directly into the place where politics is made, namely in language.

This is not where inquiries into hierarchy within the discipline of International Relations (IR) have traditionally been lodged. As David Lake repeatedly has argued (for a recent, full statement, see Lake 2009), the topic has been treated largely as a structural one. The inquiry has usually been lodged within the states system, and the counter-concept of hierarchy has been anarchy. We need new analytics in order to get at the issue. The aim of this article is,

accordingly, twofold. Our first aim is methodological. We want to firm the ground for discussing international relations in terms of concepts by discussing two key traditions that have emerged from within the discipline of history. They are the work of the German conceptual historians, especially Reinhart Koselleck, and the Cambridge School historians, first and foremost J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner.

Our second aim is substantial. For the last two thousand years of European history, as well as for the last two hundred years of global history, a key concept for thinking about hierarchy between polities has been 'empire'. We will give a nutshell conceptual history of 'empire'. A key point here will be that, after some ninety years as a mainly negatively loaded other-describing concept – what we may call an asymmetrical concept – 'empire' has returned as a self-referential concept. Empires, their shapes and forms, their rises and falls, their pros and cons, seem to be returning to centre stage in discussions of hierarchy in international relations. While we need ideal-type discussions of empire (and everything else, for that matter), we are anxious that the empire that is returning be understood as the rich and variegated class of phenomena that it actually is. Conceptual history offers welcome help in this regard. It is a reminder that a concept like empire should be treated with due care given to its linguistic surroundings, both in terms of which languages we are talking about and in terms of which other concepts lend empire its force. For example, although the Holy Roman (*imperium*) and Byzantine (*basileia*) concepts of empire partly share a history, they are active in different linguistic and semantic contexts, and so must be different. This problem increases with cultural distance. There exist, for example, imperial traditions in China and in the Eurasian steppe stretching back to the second century before our era. Since these two traditions are directly intertwined (for example, both claim a direct heavenly mandate for their universalism), they may be conceptually compared (for a state of the art, see Barfield 1989). In principle, it is also possible to compare the tradition under scrutiny here with the Chinese and the steppe traditions. In order to be conceptually informed such a comparison would have to be rooted not only in knowledge of the languages involved, but also in the specific historic uses of the concepts in those languages.

For obvious reasons, these tasks fall outside of our remit in this article. We have a key methodological and political problem here not only for studies that fasten on concepts, but for all inquiry that is rooted in the social and the historical (as opposed to formalistic) inquiry. In a rapidly globalising world, traditions are necessarily becoming ever more hybridised. As part and parcel of this, what used to be a European conversation about the concept of empire has become a global conversation, starting with US debates about the concept in the late 18th century, continuing first with the contributions of Russian communists like Trotsky, Lenin and Bukharin in the first decades of the 20th century, and then Indian anti-colonialists like Gandhi and Chinese and Latin American communists like Mao and Che. If we add further developments like African debates around the time of decolonisation and the work of the Calcutta-based subaltern study group, we are talking about a truly global conversation. One of us has done sustained work on one of these strains, and knows from personal experience that, in order to do these developments justice, conceptual knowledge is needed not only of the Western tradition, but also of the other traditions involved (cf. Neumann 2008). For example, a proper study of the conceptual contributions of the Francophone African *négritude* movement of the 1950s and 1960s to empire's conceptual history would require knowledge not only of the general Western and specifically French traditions, but also of sundry African conceptual traditions, as well as certain Caribbean ones. This work has been taken up by postcolonial studies, and is clearly increasingly relevant to the discipline of International Relations. Due to a lack of the knowledge required, our contribution in this regard must necessarily be limited to taking note of this situation and making some very broad suggestions.

In order to compare, one has to isolate some kind of analytical basis for comparison. Although hierarchical orders may differ wildly, it is still possible to use a concept of 'hierarchy' analytically. The same goes for the concept 'empire'. The parameters for our tracing of the concept are not only genealogical, but also analytical. We follow the work of Tilly (2000, 2002, compare Spruyt 1984; Motyl 1999, 2001; Cooley 2005; Nexon and Wright 2007; Nexon 2009) and hold empires to be polities where middle men with a territorial base play a central role in key practices, and where the power bargains between the centre and the middlemen are not uniform, neither ideally nor in practice. A more technical way of phrasing this double ambition, taken from the German tradition we discuss at some length below, would be to say that we proceed both 'semasiologically', tracing the different meanings and uses of the concept 'empire', and 'onomasiologically', documenting the different words used to refer to one and the same set of relations or events (Koselleck 1972: XXI–XXII).

Finally, rather than trying to be in any way comprehensive in our treatment of the historical material, our ambition in this essay is to present and discuss conceptual history as an alternative approach to some of the seminal questions within the field of International Relations, capable of informing and historicising our present debates on 'empire' and 'imperialism'.

The German origins of conceptual history

The discipline that more than any other has made the investigation of concepts, their meanings and uses, its primary task, is conceptual history – *Begriffsgeschichte*. Then again, to what extent conceptual history should really be seen as discipline in its own right or rather as a methodical tool to be used in other sciences, such as history and political science, remains and will remain an open question (cf. Koselleck 1979: 109–24). The most important manifestation of research in conceptual history is undoubtedly a work that was published in Germany between 1972 and 1992, in eight volumes, including an index volume, which carries the significant title *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Lexikon zur historisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* ('Basic Historical Concepts. Encyclopaedia of Historico-Social Language in Germany'). When the project was initiated, the encyclopaedia had three publishers: social historians Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck. When it was finalised in 1992, only one of them was still alive. In the meantime Koselleck had become one of the most important historians and historical thinkers of his day. He reaches an audience far outside traditional social history, and has an impressive body of theoretical works that evolved in dialogue with the absurdly encompassing dictionary project.

About Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* Voltaire is supposed to have said that this enormous and immortal work seems to reproach every reader for not having a longer life to spend on it. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* can instil a similar sentiment in you. It is a work of more than 7,000 pages devoted to some 120 concepts. The average length of an article is a little over 50 pages, but the most complex and important contributions are monographs of well over a hundred closely written pages. Among the entries are political concepts like 'state', 'democracy' and naturally 'politics'; social concepts like 'estate', 'class' and 'peasant'; and ideologies and -isms like 'anarchism', 'liberalism', and 'communism', to name but a few. Among these articles, which often have several authors, is the article on 'empire' and 'imperialism' which makes up an indispensable background for understanding present debates on a new political and economic world (Fisch *et al.* 1982).

When Koselleck first presented the theoretical framework for *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* in a 1967 article, he stated the following aim for the dictionary: 'To study the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new world through the history of how it has been conceptualized' (Koselleck 1967: 81). The publishers further wished to limit themselves to concepts which capture 'the process of social transformation in the wake of the

political and industrial revolution', in terms of concepts which have themselves been 'affected, transformed, excluded or necessitated' by this process (*ibid.*).

It is clear to Koselleck and his colleagues from the very start that the dictionary's function should not be exclusively to generate historical knowledge, but also – and perhaps primarily – to strengthen the public political domain and political exchange through an increased awareness of the concepts we use. Hardly a day goes by without someone publicly invoking democracy and freedom or denouncing dictatorship. But what do these concepts really mean? In the introduction Koselleck affirms that 'the dictionary is directed towards the present in that it is concerned with how the modern world is conceptualized.' (Koselleck 1972: XIV). Koselleck's present was the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, where there was an ongoing struggle to establish a democratic culture and a democratic political discourse after these had collapsed so spectacularly between 1933 and 1945. Illustratively, both the article on imperialism and most of the other articles in the dictionary contain thorough discussions of conceptual usage in the Third Reich, and can thereby be understood as a part of the Germans' *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, i.e. their reckoning with the Nazi era.

But how should the linguistic raising of awareness take place? 'To alienate the concepts through past experiences,' writes Koselleck, 'can contribute to a contemporary raising of awareness that leads from historical clarification to political clarity' (Koselleck 1972: XIX). A main idea within conceptual history is that concepts are aggregates of experiences. Even if the concept in its linguistic or literal form remains the same, it can absorb widely different historical experiences. In the end it is precisely this that makes it interesting and necessary to occupy oneself with the history of concepts, because their meanings, usages, purchase, political biases *et cetera* are in constant change. One obvious example is the concepts of 'nation' and 'national', which in the Western political discourse have changed from positive concepts available for self-decoration to become much more suspect. Similarly, 'empire' and 'imperialism' have a very complex conceptual history in which a whole range of different themes and problems are at stake: forms of rule, race, culture, civilisation, political orientation, and so on.

The need for a heightened awareness of the historicity of concepts used in understanding and analysing political and social processes was particularly visible and pronounced in post-war Germany. *Reich* or 'empire' is as good an example as any. The point of calling Nazi Germany 'The Third Reich' was to postulate a *translatio imperii* not only from the Germany that Prussia had unified in the course of three wars (1864 against Denmark, 1866 against Austria-Hungary, 1870–71 against France), but also to the Holy Roman Empire (800–1806). Nazi Germany is surely an extreme example of the politicising of scientific terms, but from the perspective of philosophy of science, the need to distinguish between quotidian terms and analytical terms, and to ensure that the latter are to some degree different from political slogans, is always present. From the perspective of social science it becomes particularly pertinent to show this in periods where concepts are changing rapidly, especially since new actors will invest considerable social energy in furthering new meanings, meanings that should preferably appear as 'natural' extensions of earlier meanings. Analyses that are unclear or ignorant about this will run the risk of appearing as a political project, rather than as research.

'Empire' and 'imperialism' are typical examples of how concepts are politicised. In the aforementioned article written by Jörg Fisch, Dieter Groh and Rudolf Walther for the third volume of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, published in 1982, the authors conclude that these concepts are no longer suited for self-reference or self-description. Since then, they have again been used precisely for this purpose, first in Russia around 1990 as arguments in favour of preserving the Soviet Union, and later in the debate about American foreign policy under George W. Bush's administration. It is precisely this situation that seems to call for reflection

and critique based on conceptual history. An introduction of these perspectives for scholars in the social sciences must necessarily highlight the person who has been the primary theoretician of conceptual history, Reinhart Koselleck.

Conceptual history according to Koselleck

In the words of Nietzsche, a central thinker for conceptual history as for so much of the humanities in general, only that which has no history can be defined (Nietzsche 1977: 820). Since the concepts we think with and act upon change over time, we cannot compare historical epochs straightforwardly, even if the concepts retain the same phonetic and semiotic expressions. If this is overlooked, absolutely central differences can be missed. The past comes to resemble the present as if there was no temporal gap separating them. The analyses lose their scientific value.

Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), who for many years held a professorship in the theory of history at the University of Bielefeld, belongs to the category of researchers within the humanities that are difficult to label, primarily because he refused to give precedence to either theory or empirics, philosophy or history. As a whole, his body of work is characterised by a productive ambivalence between linguistic-hermeneutical and historical-structural perspectives – in other words, between that which can be read, understood, and interpreted, and that which must be lived, endured, or fought through. To some degree, this ambivalence is a product of Koselleck's own academic formation, where hermeneutics and social history made up the most important impulses. As a student, Koselleck participated in Hans Georg Gadamer's seminars at the University of Heidelberg, where Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt appeared on several occasions, either as teachers or as participants. From Gadamer, Koselleck inherits the fundamental hermeneutical idea that language absorbs experiences and at the same time anticipates experiences to come by ordering them in linguistic structures that exist prior to the experiences themselves. This also entails that language determines how we understand the world, and that linguistic changes are always changes in how we perceive our own historical reality. Koselleck always kept a certain distance to philosophical hermeneutics, primarily because he could not accept that all history could be reduced to language, as Gadamer seemed to claim at times (Koselleck 2000: 97–99). While his 1954 doctoral thesis *Kritik und Krise* revolved to a large degree around textual interpretation, albeit combined with what Koselleck himself refers to as 'the analysis of sociological conditions' (Koselleck 1959/1973: 4), his 1965 *habilitation* work *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution* had a much clearer leaning toward social and administrative history (Koselleck 1981). In the latter work he was tutored by social historian Werner Conze, leader of the *Arbeitskreis für moderne Sozialgeschichte* in Heidelberg, where Koselleck also participated from 1960 onwards, and which is the point of departure for his work with *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.

The ambivalence between the linguistic and the historical in Koselleck's thought is difficult to grasp without taking note of the influence wielded by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt was a philosopher of law, and came to be known as Hitler's so-called 'crown jurist'. Although he for this reason became *persona non grata* in German university life after 1945, he was still an extremely important figure in German post-war thought. From Schmitt, Koselleck inherited an anthropological understanding of the political as a permanent and irreconcilable conflict fought not only with arms, but 'semantically' as well, with language and concepts. In this sense Schmitt's studies in conceptual history, including the study of the concept 'dictatorship', can be viewed as forerunners to the post-war conceptual history (Schmitt 1921/1928).

A concept, claims Koselleck, is different from a word by its inherent ambiguity. What makes a word a concept is that the whole socio-political context that the word refers to – and

is used in – enters into the word. As examples one could mention some of the areas or semantic fields that are covered by the word ‘state’: rule, territory, law, administration, tax, army, constitution, legal authority *et cetera*. All of these domains have their own terminology, their own conceptual apparatus, but are given something of a common denominator by the concept of ‘state’. Of importance to Koselleck is not only the fact that terms are *as* ambiguous as the historical phenomena they cover, but that they are ambiguous *in the same way*. This entails that the semantic contradictions, overlaps and slippages, for instance between rule and law, or between constitution and administration, also play out as real conflicts in history. Prior to the French revolution the concept of ‘state’ could refer both to the absolute monarch’s dominion, as in Louis XIV’s famous – if apocryphal – dictum, ‘*L’état, c’est moi*’, and to a set of rights and duties applicable to the rulers and the ruled alike, in accordance with enlightenment political critique. Hence, the semantic ambiguity inherent in the concept of ‘state’ is the same ambiguity that gives rise to the political events of the French revolution. And the struggle – the revolutionary struggle – is about the right to define the concept in an unambiguous way.

The transition to the modern age – which Koselleck dates to the period between 1750 and 1850 and calls ‘*die Sattelzeit*’, which translates into something like the ‘saddle era’ (Koselleck 1972: XV) – is characterized by the *temporalisation* of key socio-political concepts like ‘state’, ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘democracy’, and so on. This means that they acquire a temporal dimension that they didn’t have previously. Before 1750 a concept like ‘democracy’ had been a designation of one of several possible forms of rule, on par with concepts like ‘oligarchy’ and ‘tyranny’ which had been the topic of learned debates on constitutional questions since Aristotle. After 1750 ‘democracy’ breaks free from its narrow constitutional and learned context and becomes a concept that different people in the public political domain invoke when verbalising their visions for the future, their hopes, or their fears. It thereby acquires a utopian, or perhaps dystopian, component that breaks open the horizon of experience and reaches forward – literally with revolutionary force – to an

unknown future. When a concept becomes temporalised, according to Koselleck, it also becomes *ideologised, democratised, and politicised* (Koselleck 1972: XVff.). ‘Democracy’ is no longer just one of three possible forms of rule, but a utopian goal for political critique and struggle. A similar development can be observed in the concept ‘empire’, highlighted by the shift from ‘empire’ to ‘imperialism’, from a systematic and spatial to a dynamic and temporal concept – illustrated by the suffix ‘-ism’. Upon its reappearance in political debates in a Russian and American context from 1990 onwards, the concept ‘empire’ has itself become a concept of movement – pointing out the direction in which the superpowers of the era of the Cold War should be heading.

At the same time as these words become political action-concepts and movement-concepts they also activate the idea of *history*, not as a collection of past examples (*historia magistra vitae*), but as an open-ended, moveable and infinite process (Koselleck 1979: 38–66). One of the most important things that happen in this period is that the experience of history is released from specific persons or occurrences, from ‘histories’ in the plural, and becomes ‘history’ in the singular – history *an Sich*. Thus, it is turning into a case of what Koselleck calls the ‘collective singular’, a concept that appears in the singular without a concrete, delimited or specific reference; it rather refers to a general and common, but still absolute entity. Other typical examples of the collective singular, according to Koselleck, are ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘society’, ‘state’, and so on. ‘History’ as a collective singular incorporates the experience that everything around us is absolutely changeable, as a basic condition for life in the modern world (Koselleck 2006: 70–76). In the following we are going to point at some of the decisive turning points in the history of the concepts ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’, from antiquity to the modern age and into our own time, in view of

Koselleck's theories of the 'convergence between concept and history' (Koselleck 1972: XXIII).

The conceptual history of 'empire'

Approaching the history of 'empire' and 'imperialism' it soon becomes obvious that we have to move beyond the history of a single concept and rather work with a 'cluster of concepts' or a 'semantic field', in accordance with current trends in European conceptual history (den Boer 2003: 22). Let us start then by comparing briefly the terms 'empire' and 'hegemon'. In juxtaposition they display some clear historical differences. Two elements are necessary in a minimal definition of 'empire': It is a political unit governed from a centre via mediators, and the mediators have different types of relations with the centre (Nexon and Wright 2007). Historically, there have been many counter-concepts to 'empire', but one deserves special mention, namely the concept of 'state'. Within the state there are – again on the level of a minimal definition – also mediators, but their relations with the centre are the same.

The term 'hegemon' is Greek, and was first coined as a designation of the leading city state (compare Lat. *primus inter pares*, 'first among equals'). It resurfaces in the Renaissance where it refers to European powers struggling for domination in the state system. The original meaning of the Latin term *imperare* was 'to command' – as when the famous expression 'divide and conquer' is reproduced in Latin as *divide et impera*.ⁱ A key point to make that would be typical of conceptual history is that 'imperialism' is not a readily suited analytical concept to capture the logic of rule in the Roman Empire, not only because 'empire' meant something different then than later, but also because it was not a familiar term at the time. We will not pursue the debate in the philosophy of science about this here. Let us only point out that this problem is central in the important debate between hermeneutics on the one side and discourse analysis on the other.ⁱⁱ

One conceptual bridge between ancient Greece and Byzantium is provided by the concept of *oecumene*. Originally a geographical term, it is still used today as a designation of an area populated by a defined group. *Oecumene* was subsequently used respectively about an area that was under Byzantine political control at any given moment; of the true, that is orthodox, Christianity; of Christianity as a whole; and quite simply about the world. Between these meanings there existed a semantic and political tension. Byzantium was sometimes called, at times self-referentially, and at times by others, both an *oecumene* and an empire (*basileia*).

Byzantium held itself to be God's creation. Geanakoplos (1976: 39) points out that what distinguished the Roman Empire from that of the Byzantines was less the change of capitals (Rome to Constantinople), but first and foremost the creation of a *Christian* Roman Empire. Constantine's bishop, Eusebius (ca. 263–339), did the key conceptual work:

According to the Eusebian formulation, the emperor is the viceregent of God, the mimesis or 'living icon of Christ' ('zosa eikon Christou'), and he rules the *Basileia*, the Christian commonwealth, which is in turn the terrestrial counterpart of God's kingdom in heaven. Since there was only one God, it followed inevitably that there could be only one empire and therefore only one true religion. Hence ... unity of empire entailed – nay demanded – unity of religion (Geanakoplos 1976: 39).

Consequently, the chief requirement for admission to this *basileia* or empire was conversion to orthodoxy. Byzantium also made it a key task to proselytise amongst its neighbours. The empire maintained relations with sundry neighbours, including the Germanic peoples, the Visigoths in Spain, the Franks and the Lombards, the Huns and the Avars, the Slavs and also the Arabs. A number of these converted. 'It is often said', writes Kazhdan (1992: 10),

that Byzantine diplomacy had a ‘universalist’ or imperial character which was embodied in the idea of the complete coincidence of the ‘Roman empire’ with the civilized *oikoumene*. The Christian world has been conceived of as a complex hierarchy of states at the top of which stood the emperor surrounded by the family of princes.

Note, however, that the family metaphors used were not always fixed in this way, but that they were in flux. For example, based on shifting power constellations, other rulers could go from being sons to being brothers. Note that the family of kings of which the Byzantine emperor is father is a *Christian* family.

At the time of Byzantium’s golden age, Charlemagne attempted to construct an empire to succeed Rome, and as part of this undertaking he allowed himself to be crowned *imperator augustus* on Christmas Day of 800. This political unit was generally spoken of as an empire up until its dismantling in 1806; from 1254 as The Holy Roman Empire, and from 1512 as the Holy Roman Empire of German Nation (*sacrum romanum imperium nationis germanicæ*). ‘Empire’ is to be understood in this context as a territory headed by an emperor with a God-given mandate, ruling increasingly through subordinate intermediaries, with which he has different formal and informal agreements about who is to rule what (Gierke 1951: 95–100). The emperor’s standing is typically weaker the farther one travels from his throne.

In the late Middle Ages, the concept *sacerdotal* appears, from Latin *sacer* – ‘holy’ – and *dare* – ‘to give’ – as a concept referring to the areas under the pope’s domain (a *sacerdotium* being Latin for the office of a priest). Since there was a territorial overlap between this domain and other politically defined areas, among them the Holy Roman Empire, ‘sacerdotal’ and ‘empire’ became opposing concepts. The dual structure in question is characteristic of what was increasingly called *respublica christiana*, and from the 15th century on, Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ A structure like this will tend to regard the world beyond the empire as a potential extension of itself. It will also depend upon a balance where the mediators do not explicitly attempt to establish themselves on equal terms with the emperor. Throughout the 16th century the Holy Roman Empire was challenged in both of these ways (seeing the world as an extension of itself and by mediators who increasingly sought equality with the Emperor). In both cases the semantic struggle about the concept of ‘empire’ was an important bone of contention.

In the 1480s Nikolay Poppel, a man of the imperial court, arrived in Moscow and discovered that the city could not be said to be a part of the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom. He reported this back to Vienna, and was sent back to Moscow, where he proposed to Tsar Ivan III that he apply to the emperor for the title of king. Here we see the imperial logic at work: Mediators are created and kept in place by way of imperial prerogatives. Ivan III refused this logic by retorting that he and his ancestors ruled the country by the virtue of God, and signed his reply in the capacity of ‘great ruler (*tsar’ velikiy*) of all of Rus’ by the virtue of God’. One of the conditions that made this possible was the tsar’s self-understanding as ruler of the Third Rome, that is of Moscow as successor to the Byzantine capital Constantinople, which had fallen some decades before (1453), and to Rome before it. In a Russian context the term ‘empire’ was rarely used, as one quite simply spoke of the different ‘Romes’, and the *translatio imperii* between them. As we see, the Roman Empire was a more or less explicit model for all European empires (Pagden 1995: 11–28), with the theme of *translatio imperii* constituting a recurrent feature of European history.^{iv}

When the Holy Roman emperor replied to the Russian tsar in 1513, in German, he did not address the Russian ‘tsar’ (*tsar’*), but the ‘emperor’ (*Kaiser*). The two titles share a common etymological origin (*caesar*), but the German *Kaiser* could be, and indeed was, translated

back to Russian not as *tsar*', but as *imperator*. Hence the Russians had established a conceptual base for their continuing campaign to be recognised by the Holy Roman Empire on equal terms, with the tsar and the emperor as equal brother monarchs before God. When Peter the Great allowed himself to be crowned *imperator* in 1721, he referred to this occurrence as precedence (see Neumann 2005: 18).

In the Russian case, it is worth noticing that it is still the person, the *imperator*, who is crucial, while the territory which he rules over, the *imperium*, is of secondary importance. In the case of the Holy Roman Empire, however, the challenges were increasingly focused on the territory. As an example, we could take Henry VIII's *Act in Restraint of Appeals* from 1533, that was primarily directed towards the pope in Rome, but that is also significant in our context. Here it is written:

Where, by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles, it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one supreme head and king having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown ... to keep [this realm] from the annoyance as well of the see of Rome as from the authority of other foreign potentates attempting the diminution or violation thereof ... (quoted in de Carvalho 2006: 133–34; see also Armitage 2000: 11; Pagden 1995: 12–14).

Here 'empire' refers to a political unit which is bound by no foreign power. In the context of conceptual history we can say that the concept of 'empire' in both the Russian and the English examples approaches a collective singular in the sense that it goes from having several specific references to having a single, more or less abstract, reference. As a consequence, the term lends itself to being applied to ever new areas and phenomena. The English example further illustrates a central tug-of-war in European political history, namely the emergence of a system of sovereign states. From the perspective of conceptual history the point here is that 'empire', in the core period of this process (the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century), refers to 'sovereign state'. When the state system was established, it was the term 'state' which became the common name for this phenomenon, whereas 'empire' continued to be the designation of the Holy Roman Empire, which continued to exist in the shadows of the state system. We still have a remainder of this meaning of the term 'empire' in the juridical description of state sovereignty, where the king is said to be *imperator: rex in regno suo est imperator* ('the king is emperor in his realm').

Parallel to this, 'empire' acquired a new meaning and use as an appellation for asymmetrical political units where the leading part lay in Europe (Spain, Portugal), and the dependent parts were located overseas. This development is described by Pagden:

The European empires have two distinct, but interdependent histories. The first ... is the history of the European discovery and colonization of America. It begins with Columbus's first voyage in 1492 and ends somewhat less precisely in the 1830s with the final defeat of the royalist armies in South America. The second is the history of the European occupation of Asia, of Africa and of the Pacific. It begins in the 1730s, but only takes hold in the 1780s as European hegemony in the Atlantic is coming to an end (Pagden 1995: 1–2).

In the 17th and first half of the 18th century there is little debate about the form and moral status of the empire. Instead the debate focuses on the status of the forms of intelligent life (fully human?) that inhabit the other continents, particularly the one most recently discovered. 'Empire' is increasingly understood as a natural way of politically organising a

project of progress, in which the more civilised parts are ensuring the historical progression of the less civilised (Bowden 2009: 77–158). This is in accordance with Koselleck's overarching point that *die Sattelzeit* (ca. 1750–1850) was a period in which concepts become temporalised. Accordingly, the differences between Western civilisation and colonial barbarism were understood in temporal terms, constituting more or less progressed stages in the unfolding of history. Hence, even the defenders of democracy were long of the opinion that empire, which was viewed as non-democratic, was befitting for the barbarians. For instance, John Stuart Mill wrote in his *On Liberty* that 'Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, providing the end be their improvement' (Mill 1989: 13). In accordance with this Pagden operates with three main meanings of the concept 'empire' that were still in use at the end of the 18th century: a form of rule which is limited by no other foreign entity (i.e. which is sovereign), a territory consisting of more than one political community, and a ruler invested with absolute sovereignty (Pagden 1995: 17).

In the second half of the 18th century philosophers like Diderot, Herder and Kant launched criticisms where the point was that empire entailed *foreign* rule, and that this was an evil (compare Muthu 2003). The concept of 'empire' was contrasted with 'cosmopolitanism'.^v This debate anticipates an important topic of the 19th century, namely how the new political concept of 'nation' was to be connected to various concepts of universalistic human communities. To the French, the concepts of 'nation' and 'empire' merged already in the wake of the French revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. When Napoleon had himself crowned as *empereur* in 1804 it was for the French Empire – a political unit which was to be led by the French nation.

'Imperialism' as a battle-concept

In the 19th century, partly in reaction to Napoleon's imperial ambitions and as a result of the on-going process of temporalisation and politicisation, the concept 'empire' becomes a key issue in the political battles of the time. From around 1850, 'empire' turns into what Koselleck refers to as a 'battle-concept' (e.g. Koselleck 2006: 190), and is joined by the concept of 'imperialism', by which the entire semantics of 'empire' is finally catapulted out of the relatively stable political structures of the pre-modern period and into the global conflicts of modernity.

Fisch, Groh and Walther (1982) document how closely the concept of 'empire' was tied to the question of form of rule, in other words to a process within the nation state itself. Napoleon's empire lasted only ten years, but the mark he left on the concept lasted all the way through the 19th century. The contrasting of nationalism and imperialism by Diderot, Herder, and Kant proved to be a temporary phenomenon. Nationalism and imperialism merged in a narrative of progress where 'we' are civilising the strangers, exemplified in British Rudyard Kipling's thought that civilising the others was 'the white man's burden', the others being 'half savage, half child'. Kipling published his poem as the United States pursued its imperial venture in the Philippines in 1898, and it ends with a call upon the Americans to shoulder their responsibility. Again we are talking about a *translatio imperii*. Half a century later the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said in private that the relationship between Great Britain and the United States could be compared to the relationship between ancient Greece and the Roman Empire: The former's task was to civilise the upcoming world power (Horne 1988).

In France, 'imperialism' was used synonymously with 'bonapartism' and 'caesarism', as a demarcation against a practice of rule that was associated with Napoleon I and III. In an edition of the German dictionary *Brockhaus* from 1884 one can read the following definition: 'Imperialism is the condition in a state where the regent's arbitrary and militarily based power reigns unbounded' (quoted in Fisch *et al.* 1982: 179). Here, and in corresponding

definitions, 'imperialism' is another word for tyranny, or for rule built on oppression and military power in general. Even if economic models of explanation – imperialism as a strategy to acquire new markets for domestic industry – steadily emerge, the traditional political meaning persists until the turn of the century, and even longer in dictionaries and encyclopedias. In the long diachronic perspective that characterises conceptual history, precisely this history of 'imperialism' as an appellation for tyrannical forms of rule, can contribute to explain why it appears impossible to launch the concept as a positive self-description even for the most ardent defenders of colonialism. Rather, it finds its place in socialist and social democratic anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist propaganda.

The main point of the article in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is to show how 'imperialism' is formed as a battle-concept. It is hardly surprising that several examples are drawn from Britain, where liberal politicians began to use the concept of 'imperialism' in domestic political debates attacking Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (Koebner and Schmidt 1964: 122ff.). From the perspectives of conceptual history it gets even more interesting once we get to Germany, since here the concept primarily serves as a demarcation against, and an attack on, British colonial policy. Imperialism is something terrible and immoral that the British are doing. As is well known, the Germans too, under Kaiser Wilhelm II, had great colonial ambitions. In the eyes of the Germans, however, these ambitions do not amount to 'imperialism', but are rather called, in a good euphemistic spirit, *Weltpolitik* ('world politics'). According to their self-understanding the German world politics is not aimed at – offensively – conquering as much of the world as possible, but – defensively – to create an equilibrium. But because the Germans were so slow in acquiring colonies, their 'world politics' in practice becomes a highly aggressive concept aimed at the British hegemony.

This constellation of a negative, disqualifying term 'imperialism' and a positive, qualifying term 'world politics' is interesting in relation to an article that Koselleck wrote in the 1970s, during his work with *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, which bears the title 'Of the historical-political semantics of asymmetrical counter-concepts', published in his collection of articles *Vergangene Zukunft* (Koselleck 1979: 211–59). Conceptual history is here expanded to include what he refers to as 'counter-concepts': constellations of two concepts where one is used to describe the speaker and the group he or she belongs to and the other to describe the others, those who are regarded as strangers or enemies. What makes these concepts 'asymmetrical' is that they speak of the enemy in a derogatory way. They are one-sided; the counterpart feels addressed, but not recognised. It activates a division between 'we' and 'you', between 'us' and 'them', but at the same time performs a substantial classification of these groups: Hellenics and Barbarians, Christians and Heathens, Occidentals and Orientals, Humans and Non-Humans. The same is the case with the Germans' use of the counter-terms 'imperialism' and 'world politics' when they were talking about Britain around the turn of the century: We are world politicians, you are imperialists. This usage persists up until the First World War.

In the beginning of the 20th century a shift seems to take place in Germany: 'Imperialism' goes from being an anti-English battle-concept to becoming – one could perhaps say – a combined concept and a counter-concept. A struggle about the right to define the concept takes place – not unlike the one which took place on the eve of the French Revolution and which was discussed briefly above. In the national debate in Germany the concept of 'imperialism' first picked up momentum in social democratic criticism. The social democrats use the concept – perfectly in accordance with earlier meanings – to criticise what they call the 'new war movement'.^{vi} This use of the concept was a ringing historical success, which first spread to Russia, where it was, characteristically, stylised by Lenin, who saw imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism and something that found at its root the struggle between capitalist great powers about world markets that would inevitably lead to

war, and then to the rest of the world. For example, Johan Galtung's structuralist reading of imperialism leaned heavily on the idea that global imperial structures depended on a Western worker aristocracy that collaborated with local elites worldwide (for an IR discussion, see Brown 1981).

In Germany, while the social democrats forged their highly asymmetrical and denunciatory concepts of 'empire' and 'imperialism', the supporters of an expansive foreign policy tried to give the term a positive content in order to be able to use it as self-reference and self-description. The pioneer in this process of semantic innovation was Erich Marcks, who claimed in 1903 that imperialism was simply a logical way of continuing Germany's 'spiritual-political development from the last centuries' (quoted in Fisch *et al.* 1982: 198). In the language used by Marcks and his fellow conservatives and nationalists we recognise that 'world politics' is no longer necessary as a counter-concept and as self-description. Instead 'imperialism' has split up in concept and counter-concept at the same time. However, Marcks and his comrades-in-arms are not successful – other than in illustrating a very interesting and crucial point of conceptual history. It becomes clear that the negative meaning, partly the connection to tyranny and military power, and partly – and most importantly – its association with English politics, lives on in the concept. Hence, rather than becoming a battle-concept for the national right, 'imperialism' – with the opposite edge – becomes a battle-concept for the socialist left, more precisely, for the German and international labour movement.

A few decades later, in the period of National Socialism, it is still impossible to use 'imperialism' as a self-referential concept, partly because the communists and the socialists had retained their definitional power, and partly because it was reserved for the policy of the Western powers. As is well known, the national socialists instead used a series of spatial metaphors, such as *Großraum* and *Lebensraum*, to verbalise their ambitions in foreign policy. In Mussolini's Italy we find a similar spatial orientation in the notion of the Italian house, *casa italiana*, and in an attempt of a *translatio imperii* similar to that of the German Nazis. While the Germans counted backwards to three and ended at the Holy Roman Empire, the Italian fascists went straight back to the Roman Empire, for instance with the idea of the Mediterranean as *mare nostrum*.

Seemingly then, the semantic struggle over the concept was won by the left. Hence, during the Cold War 'empire' and 'imperialism' was used worldwide in an explicitly asymmetrical way, in order to denigrate the way others went about their political ordering. In the United States, Soviet foreign policy was considered imperial. Particularly during the Vietnam War the home opposition to American foreign policy routinely referred to it as imperial (for recent continuations of these usages, see e.g. Johnson 2004; Kiely 2007). In Chinese discourse from the 1960s onwards, American and Soviets were both running dogs of imperialism. The struggle for national self-determination was everywhere referred to as an anti-colonial struggle, in which the concept 'colony' took its force from the hierarchically subaltern place relative to a centre within an empire (e.g. Mondlane 1969). In terms of conceptual history, these developments increase the territorial and discursive reach of the debate. An increase in scope goes together with an increase in levels. Frantz Fanon and others (Fanon 1961/1967, compare e.g. Memmi 1957/1991) also pioneered studies of how colonisation on the level of polities have their parallels in the colonisation of life worlds and personal identity formation. Broader comparative work on the clash of polities and political orders have also enriched the universe under discussion here by marshalling historical sequences that are clearly relevant (e.g. Chakrabarty 2000). All this work focuses on the effects of empire rather than on its conceptualisation. Conceptualisation was a non-topic, in political as well as in academic discourse. Instructively, when Michael Doyle published a book on empire in 1986, there was very little interest. There is an interesting contrast to be

drawn to Doyle's subsequent work on the 'democratic peace'. That work overlapped his work on empire, but had a phenomenal reception.

Since conceptual history was conceived of and has functioned as a way into social history, at least in part, there are links to be forged on this issue, but this is not the place to do it. Instead we will move on to discuss how conceptual history can be used to shed new light on the return of 'empire' and 'imperialism' into American political debate around the turn of the 21st century.

Empire's return as a self-referential concept

After the end of the Cold War 'empire' and 'imperialism' returned as self-referential concepts. One precondition for this was the surviving millenarianism in the key polities involved (for the United States, see Stephanson 1995; for Russia, see Neumann 1999; also Colás 2006).^{vii} Our main example is taken from the debates on American foreign policy. On July 17th 2003, the NAI (New Atlantic Initiative) and the AEI (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research), two influential neoconservative think tanks, staged a public debate between British public intellectual Niall Ferguson, author of the book *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (Ferguson 2003a), and US foreign policy commentator and leading figure in the neoconservative movement, Robert Kagan, author of *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (Kagan 2003a). The contributions were later published in the neoconservative parish newsletter *The National Interest* (Ferguson 2003b; Kagan 2003b).^{viii} The title of the debate was a fairly simple, yet controversial claim: 'The United States is, and should be, an empire'. By summer 2003, this claim, in spite of its controversial and rather anachronistic ring, 'had become a staple on talk shows and had spurred writers to produce a flurry of op-eds, essays, and books', if we are to believe one of the main discussants, defence intellectual Andrew Bacevich (2003a: xi).

In our context it is interesting to note to what extent the main issue at stake in the debate between Ferguson and Kagan is not, or at least not only, the current state of affairs in American foreign politics, but the historical and semantic contents of the concept of 'empire'. Ferguson, on the one hand, has dedicated much of his work as a historian to bringing out the advantages and positive sides of imperial reign, most notably the British. Kagan, on the other hand, belongs to a long tradition of American conservatives regarding the United States as the true home of freedom on Earth and as the traditional enemy of all imperial power, British and otherwise. Hence, it should come as no surprise to us that their disagreement to a major extent is a conceptual one, as illustrated by the following ironic remark from Ferguson, attacking Kagan's insistence on using the word 'hegemon':

I am a hegemon. You are a power. He is an empire. We are nation-building. You are occupying. They are colonizing.

If we are to take Ferguson seriously at this point – and there seem to be good reasons for doing so – there is no doubt that the issue at hand is also a linguistic and conceptual one. Concepts like 'empire' and 'state' are not just analytical designations of political phenomena; they are also constitutive parts of politics itself. The debate between Ferguson and Kagan primarily revolves around the use of concepts. Mostly, the two discussants agree upon the characteristics of the American political, economic, military, and cultural dominance in general, but they disagree about what to call it. Before we consider the debate itself, it will be instructive to review some of the semantic and conceptual processes and innovations that led up to it.

Already in 1999 David Rieff claimed that only a new sort of imperialism would be able to deal with the humanitarian crises of our age, in Kosovo, Somalia or Rwanda. Presuming that only the United States could fill the role of the empire, he argued that US foreign policy should adopt a 'liberal imperialism' (Rieff 2003: 10). Similarly, in 2002, Deepak Lal, Professor of International Development Studies at UCLA, gave a lecture entitled 'In Defense of Empires', arguing for the need of a 'Pax Americana' and for the United States to face up to its imperial obligations (Lal 2003: 29). Additionally, the historical roots of the semantics of 'empire' and 'imperialism' have been discussed in several articles, proclaiming the United States to be 'the New Rome' (Bender 2003: 81; Bacevich 2003b: 93) or, on the other hand, vehemently dismissing this parallel. The idea was that the right and duty to imperial power had been passed on successively from the Romans to the Americans, i.e. that a *translatio imperii* had taken place. According to Bacevich, already in the 18th century the American political project was understood as something unique, evident in the many references to 'a New Jerusalem'. Today, some 300 years later, the nation's political, economic, cultural, and military dominance has become so undisputed that it may seem like 'the New Jerusalem has become the New Rome' (Bacevich 2003b: 95).

What kind of discussions are we dealing with here? What is the topic? Some possible answers could be globalisation, a new economic and political world order, the post-Cold War world, American foreign policy, and so on. These answers – along with many related ones – would of course be correct, but at the same time they are missing an important point: that this is in a very central sense a debate about language. Obviously, the occasion for this conceptual reorientation is the end of the Cold War and the new world order, the American military, worldwide economic and cultural engagements, the humanitarian catastrophes in Africa and the former Yugoslavia and, not least, the era of global terrorism. In this new political situation the old and well-known term 'superpower' appears rather outdated and almost meaningless, mostly because we are used to thinking of two 'superpowers' balancing each other. After 1989, however, there is only one. Together with the weakened position of the UN and the doubts concerning NATO as a military force, these factors create a new global political situation where the United States is the supreme dominating force, which we need to come to terms with, politically as well as conceptually.

Over the last years there has been no lack of suggestions of what to call this new hegemonic power. In 1998 the French foreign minister Hubert Védrine famously suggested that the US should be seen as a *hyperpuissance* (Védrine 2003). The editor of the liberal German newspaper *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, came up with another possible concept: *Überpower* (Joffe 2006). Obviously, these terms are neologisms, and even though they have made a certain impact in academic spheres, there is no reason to believe they will ever become a part of everyday political language. Furthermore, as neologisms and conceptual innovations they do not activate or tap into the collective historical experiences contained in concepts with a long history of political and social use. Both 'empire' and 'imperialism' are such concepts. As we have seen, they have a long and complex history, going back to the Romans and to the Latin word *imperare*, 'to command', and reaching its peak in the nineteenth century, when both 'empire' and 'imperialism' are frequently used in political debates in most European countries. Throughout the two thousand years they have been in use, these concepts have absorbed an abundance of collective historical experiences that are inevitably activated as soon as the concepts are used – whether one likes it or not. This, of course, carries with it both advantages and disadvantages. Undoubtedly it is safer to invent a new term, like *Überpower*, that one can attempt to control and give the desired meaning. But the effect and impact is innumerable greater if one succeeds in appropriating a term that already exists and is used, and that is tied to existing experiences and patterns of understanding. While the term 'hegemon' presupposes the existence of a state system within which a state can be leading,

the term 'empire' would alter the world's view of the United States forever. 'Empire' is a term that covers another type of power constellation than the state system. It is no longer a question of being first among equals, but of being predominant over others that are (more or less) subordinate.

Hence, the terms 'imperialism' and 'empire' now once again play a central role in the conversation about global politics, where the main contentious issue is whether we still live in a so-called 'Westphalian order', where the world simply can be divided into an inside where 'we' freely arrange our business, and an outside where anarchy rules; or whether we are entering a new order where networks are so tightly knit and state borders are so relative that the division between inside and outside, domestic and foreign, no longer can serve as the basis for political conversation. In the Westphalian order the key concepts were those of 'state', 'sovereignty' and 'anarchy'. In the emerging order, the key concepts seem increasingly to be 'network' and 'empire'.

American empire

As noted in Bacevich's reference to 'the New Jerusalem', the semantics of 'empire' is not something new to the American tradition. Already the American republic's Founding Fathers had the institutions of the Roman republic as their ideal, both institutionally and architectonically, and they appropriated Roman imperial terms like 'senator', 'Capitol Hill', *etc.* 'Empire' was also in use as a self-referential term, for instance in the second sentence of the first Federalist Paper, where Hamilton describes the United States as in many ways the most interesting empire in the world (Hamilton *et al.* 1777–78/1961). The account could proceed to trace the concept in the debates of the 19th century about the Monroe Doctrine, which declared the Western hemisphere as an American sphere of interest versus European powers, and culminate with the use of the term among geopoliticians and politicians around the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, particularly around the Spanish-American War in 1898, the war that Kipling regarded as calling for American imperial policy. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the concepts 'empire' and 'imperialism' in terms of positive self-descriptions more or less disappeared from American politics – instead an 'evil empire' appeared.

Returning to the twenty-first century, while they are not in agreement about the desirability of an empire (with Bacevich being the one most explicitly opposed to the prospect), none of the participants in the debate on 'American Empire' seem to doubt that language greatly influences the political process. In his introduction to the anthology *The Imperial Tense. Problems and Prospects of American Empire*, in which several of the essays and lectures mentioned here are collected, the editor Andrew Bacevich bemoans how 'the familiar language' of political debate 'does less to illuminate than to conceal', serving mostly as 'a veil'. However, he concludes, 'the idea of "America as empire" has the potential to change all that':

Embracing a new vocabulary, shedding hoary old axioms, and entertaining thoughts once thought to be unthinkable may make it possible to see America's global role in a new and clearer light. Examining US foreign policy through the prism of empire may promote greater candor and seriousness and, in doing so, may bring ordinary Americans into the discussion of matters from which they have too long been excluded. (Bacevich 2003a: xiii–xiv)

This convergence of historical events and linguistic representation is also the topic of the exchange between Ferguson and Kagan. After Ferguson has enumerated a series of concepts from the debate on foreign policy, more or less in the form of a nursery rhyme, among them

‘hegemon’, which happens to be Kagan’s preferred term for the United States, ‘power’, and ‘empire’, the British historian concludes in the following way: ‘It seems to me that this is very clearly a semantic question’. In this way he picks up the thread from the moderator, Radek Sikorski, who kicked off the discussion by listing a number of definitions of ‘empire’ from different dictionaries such as *Oxford*, *Merriam Webster*, and *American Heritage*.

In his opening statement Ferguson first addresses the semantics of ‘empire’ and the hesitance of most Americans to accept this concept as a description of their country, both for political and for historical reasons. Then he introduces his preferred phrase for describing the US, ‘empire in denial’. The meaning of the concept ‘empire’, Ferguson argues, cannot be established solely on the basis of definitions in dictionaries, but has to take into account the entire history of the British Empire and other past empires. According to this broader definition of ‘empire’, the United States is ‘one of the most powerful empires in all history, and the only remarkable thing about this is that so many Americans are unaware of the fact’. To prove his point, moving from a more linguistic to a more historical register, Ferguson uses what he refers to as his ‘quack like a duck’ argument: ‘If it quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. If it quacks like an empire, it probably is an empire’.

Robert Kagan, on the other hand, starts by warning against descending ‘into a definitional argument’. Still, he begins by criticising Ferguson’s semantic distinctions. As soon as he starts formulating his own views on United States foreign policy, he emphatically leaves semantics behind to consider political reality: ‘I won’t call it “empire” because I don’t believe it is an empire, but the most successful global hegemon, the most successful global power in history’. Thus, Kagan has no problem admitting to the fact that after the end of the Cold War the United States is indeed the supreme global power, but he strongly objects to the idea that it can or should be termed an ‘empire’ in the old, European sense. Instead, he prefers ‘hegemon’, originally a Greek term, referring to the dominant or leading city-state, which does not have the same aura of oppression and exploitation as ‘empire’. On the contrary, Kagan states, significantly quoting the second *Godfather* film, ‘America always made money for its partners’.

From the 1990s and onwards there was a debate in the discipline of International Relations about whether the United States was to be counted ‘only’ as a hegemon within the current state system, or whether the state system itself is in the course of transforming into an imperial structure. The exchange between Ferguson and Kagan exemplifies a politically applied strand of this broader debate. Where the political space within the state is homogenous, it is heterogeneous within the empire. When Sikorski reaches for the dictionaries, it is as part of the political tug-of-war about whether politics still is, and still should be, founded upon the idea of a system of states, or whether the United States has embraced, and should embrace, the role as an imperial power.

Broadening the scope: Cambridge School approaches to the history of ‘empire’

To fully grasp the return of ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ as positive self-descriptions in terms of a semantic and political event, as a specific ‘moment’ in the history of political thought and action, as Pocock (1975) has put it, it might be necessary to broaden the theoretical and methodological scope. The question remains if a reappraisal of the long tradition of usages and meanings inherent in these concepts can really help us to understand the conceptual shift or innovations that we are witnessing in the debates about American foreign policy.

In the introduction to the first volume of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Koselleck argues that the main methodological contribution of conceptual history to the historical disciplines consists in the ‘diachronic principle’ (Koselleck 1972: XXI). Obviously, doing conceptual history also presupposes traditional critical and philological work, to analyse the meaning and use of a specific concept in a specific context, but the main task consists in

tracking the slow, almost unnoticeable long-term changes, relating them to social and political processes. Against this background we must ask if the sudden shifts in the semantics and pragmatics of the concept 'empire', as they have been observed here, do not in fact lie outside the scope of *Begriffsgeschichte*, in terms of a study of conceptual permanence and long diachronic lines, as outlined by Koselleck. Indeed, it seems that if we focus solely on the long-term, continuous history, we will be at a loss explaining how, by what processes or changes, 'empire' or 'imperialism' can be reappropriated and reintroduced into public debate as positive concepts and self-descriptions. For the concept of 'empire' to become eligible as a slogan for a new conservative movement, in the struggle for an active and aggressive foreign policy, a conceptual shift must have taken place, both on a semantic and a pragmatic level.

To pinpoint and analyse these momentary, sudden shifts has rather been the ambition of one of the other linguistically informed approaches to the history of political thought developed in the post-war era – mostly referred to as the Cambridge School and pioneered by the brilliant historians and political thinkers such as J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. In his eponymous magisterial work Pocock ventures to delimit and analyse what he refers to as 'the Machiavellian moment' in European history (Pocock 1975). The topic of the book is the rise of Florentine republicanism at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the works of political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Savonarola and Guicciardini, as well as the influence of this tradition on 'Atlantic', meaning English and American, political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pocock's methodological approach to this rather monumental task is to describe 'the moment, and the manner, in which Machiavellian thought made its appearance' (Pocock 1975: vii). To achieve this, Pocock – much in the same way as Koselleck – chooses to focus on language and particularly on certain words, first and foremost 'virtue', 'fortune' and 'corruption', constituting the conceptual backbone of the tradition of political thought he refers to as 'republicanism'. To study the Machiavellian moment, he concludes, means to study 'how Machiavelli and his contemporaries pursued the intimations of these words' (*ibid.*: viii).

The parallels between Pocock's and Koselleck's approaches are obvious, but so are the differences. In addition to the focus on a particular historical and rhetorical moment, as opposed to the long diachronic lines of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Pocock turns his attention to a group of key thinkers, 'Machiavelli and his contemporaries', to explore how they worked with, used and changed the meaning of this set of words. By contrast, Koselleck is far less interested in the interventions and innovations of individuals, in their particular texts and rhetorical actions. Instead he wants to track the changes in the concepts themselves and the collective experiences invested in them. Turning to our topic here, it would be both possible and useful to think of the debates on American foreign policy and the return of 'empire' as self-description in terms of a 'moment' in Pocock's sense – not a Machiavellian but an Imperial one – and to analyse how the different scholars, theorists and political commentators, each in their own way, have contributed to shaping this 'moment', not least by investing the key concepts of 'empire' and 'imperialism' with new meanings.

To suggest an even more detailed and methodologically informed approach to the analysis of this particular conceptual shift, this Imperial moment, if you like, we could draw on some ideas developed by Pocock's close collaborator and ally, the historian and philosopher Quentin Skinner. For Skinner, ever since he started his illustrious career in intellectual history in the 1960s, the main task of the intellectual historian has been to find out what the author of a text, in most cases a work of political philosophy, was doing when he was writing – or rather, what the author thought he was doing and what he intended to do (e.g. Skinner 1988). In the first part of Skinner's work his main theoretical influence was speech act theory, as developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle – hence, the goal of every textual interpretation was to reconstruct the 'illocutionary force' of the text or statements

involved (Skinner 1971). In the 1990s Skinner turned to the theory and history of rhetorics in order to locate more tools and categories for understanding a text in the pragmatic and political context of its production and reception (Skinner 1996). His focus, however, was still on the intentions and actions of individual authors, differing quite radically from the focus on collective experiences and long diachronic lines which dominated *Begriffsgeschichte* under the auspices of Koselleck. Much in the same way as Pocock, Skinner tends to reconstruct something like a historical moment, in terms of a 'linguistic context', in which a particular text intervenes and in which are found the 'conventions' that enable us to decide what kind of speech act this particular text performs (Skinner 1972). Is it an act of criticism or support, of continuing a tradition or breaking with it? Skinner's theories give us the tools to describe in great detail such linguistic acts and textual interventions embedded in a historical and political context.

The implications of this approach for writing intellectual history as well as for reflecting on contemporary issues in political philosophy has been explored by Skinner in several seminal contributions, most recently in his work on different concepts of political freedom (Skinner 2002b). In several articles he has shown how the negative concept of liberty in terms of freedom from constraint, most famously propagated by Isaiah Berlin, can be traced back to the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, or more specifically, to certain passages in his *Leviathan* (Skinner 2002a). Furthermore, by asking what Hobbes was reacting against, Skinner has unearthed another concept of freedom, still negative, but linked to the question of forms of government, to participation and representation. In this alternative tradition, which Skinner and Pocock often refers to as 'Republican', but which is eclipsed by the canonical tradition from Hobbes to Bentham and Mill, freedom is also defined in a negative way, not as freedom from any constraint, but as freedom from arbitrary power (Skinner 1998). Even though Skinner is indeed operating with rather long diachronic lines, much in the same way as Koselleck, what really interests him is to pinpoint the exact historical moment and the exact text where the establishment of a new and dominant concept of freedom takes place.

The bearing of Skinner's theories and methods on the topic at hand should be obvious. To re-establish a positive concept of 'empire' as a self-description, Ferguson and Bacevich need to break with the dominating semantic tradition of using 'empire' and 'imperialism' as negative counter-concepts. To achieve this goal they employ different strategies: whereas Ferguson, the historian, ventures to reinterpret the British imperial heritage in more positive and civilising terms, focusing on the economical and political advantages of imperial rule, Bacevich, on the other hand, argues that this semantic shift will bring about a better understanding of the actual political and economical role of the United States in the world today. In comparison, Kagan insists on the continuity of the conceptual tradition and wants to replace the negative counter-concept of 'empire' with the less historically laden 'hegemon' – even though his view of the new world order after the Cold War to a large extent corresponds to that of Ferguson and Bacevich.

In an apt summing-up of the theoretical and methodological differences between Skinner and Koselleck, the Finnish political scientist Kari Palonen concludes that whereas Skinner's rhetorical approach 'turns the history of conceptual changes into a history of sudden and successive *kairos*-situations, which are more or less successfully captured and used by political agents', Koselleck gives priority to 'the slower, long and medium term history of the *chronos* time' (Palonen 1999: 55). In the same article he concludes that 'it is hard, if not impossible, to use both of them simultaneously' (*ibid.*: 43). In our opinion, Palonen's conclusion is perhaps too pessimistic. Far from propagating a complete theoretical overlap between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the approaches of Pocock and Skinner, we will argue that an attempt at grasping the return of 'empire' and 'imperialism' as positive self-descriptions in the debates on American foreign policy will need to include both perspectives, both the long

diachronic lines and the sudden conceptual shifts and innovations, both conceptual and rhetorical analysis (for a further discussion see Jordheim 2007).

Semantic innovations and political effects

In light of the context of conceptual history provided here we might gain a clearer idea about what is really at stake in the American debate on ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’, and the effects that follow in its wake, in the United States as well as in Europe. In a significant sense, we are witnessing an attempt on the part of the political right to rob the political left – social democrats, socialists, and communists – of their almost century-long monopoly on the concepts of ‘empire’ and ‘imperialism’ as descriptions of actual politics. At the same time there is an attempt to inverse the concept, from a negative counter-concept to a positive self-description. Progress, universality and moral superiority are still important components of the new understanding of ‘empire’. For instance, Ben Wattenberg, senior researcher at the AEI, claims that the United States should intervene in other states simply because American values are universal, and thereby superior to all other values. The United States is to Wattenberg the first universal nation: ‘Only Americans have the sense of mission – and gall – to engage in *benign*, but energetic, global cultural advocacy. We are the most potent cultural imperialists in history, although generally constructive and noncoercive’ (quoted in Dorrien 2004: 79). We recognise here that the concepts of nationalism and imperialism have merged once more.

Not only the American neoconservatives speak up on behalf of a new empire. Ferguson also clearly displays his personal political preferences when he defines ‘empire’ as ‘great power that has left its mark on the international relations of an era’ (Ferguson 2004: 10) and writes that

...many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule. But what the world needs today is not just any kind of empire. What is required is a *liberal* empire – that is to say, one that not only underwrites the free international exchange of commodities, labor and capital but also creates and upholds the conditions without which markets cannot function ... as well as provides public goods, such as transport, infrastructure, hospitals and schools...’. (Ferguson 2004: 2)

Ferguson also relates to the key scholarly debate in International Relations when he claims that the concept of ‘empire’ is compatible with a ‘unipolar world’ (Ferguson 2004: 8). Here he is alluding to Kenneth Waltz’s structural theory about the Cold War state system as ‘bipolar’ (Waltz 1979), while the system succeeding it was ‘unipolar’. The term itself appeared in an article by Charles Krauthammer in *Foreign Affairs* from the beginning of the 1990s (Krauthammer 1990). Waltz himself thinks that the state system will remain bi- or multipolar because the balance of power mechanisms inherent in it will produce one or more opposite poles to U.S. power. Ferguson and many others, on the other hand, think that a unipolar world can be stable, and they make use of a particular understanding of ‘empire’ to support their argument.

Finally, the renaissance of ‘empire’ as a self-referential term is not limited to the United States. In Russia in September 2003, Anatoliy Chubays, a key politician and financier in the last two decades, gave a speech titled ‘Russia’s mission’. The mission, he claimed, ‘has to be the ideology of the liberal imperialism, and the goal of the Russian state should be to build a liberal empire’. To Chubays, ‘liberal imperialism’ meant that ‘the Russian state must ensure with all available means that Russian business expands abroad – to our neighbors’. ‘To me’, he added, ‘it means that the Russian state, through direct legal measures, must do everything in its power to support the basic values of freedom and democracy, not only in Russia, but in all neighboring states.’ (Chubays, as quoted in Kjærnet 2007). As a player in the oil business,

it is largely himself that Chubays is referring to here. In addition to this self-referential and prescriptive use of the concept, Russia's policy under president Putin has been described as 'imperial', not least by people from other former Soviet republics (e.g. Ismailzade 2006).

Notably, the concept 'empire' is not reserved for neoconservatives and liberal capitalists in today's debate. In 2000 the American Michael Hardt and the Italian Antonio Negri published their book *Empire*, which has since had a broad reception. Their project in this book is to trace how the *multitude*, understood as the collective of steaming human bodies around the world, is organising as a *dispositif* based on contemporaneousness, collocation, as indirect forms of control as possible, and openness to as many systems as possible (see in particular Hardt and Negri 2000: 164–67). They appropriated the notion of chaotic ('rhizomatic') organisation from the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and the term *dispositif* from Foucault. Empire becomes a governmentality – a way to think about the organisation of the social. Hardt and Negri are also careful to point out that, for them, empire does not equal the United States. One of the reasons why they propose the concepts of 'multitude' and 'empire' is to provide an alternative to the concepts of 'people', 'nation' and 'state'. To equate empire and the United States would amount to collapsing this project. Hardt and Negri's understanding of the concept was also dealt a rather severe blow – and a hostile environment – when the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001 inaugurated a period where the United States escalated their use of well known imperial measures such as overseas military occupation and appointment of loyal mediators.

As the examples ranging from Robert Kagan to Hardt and Negri show, from the early 21st century onwards the concept of 'empire' must be interpreted as an attempt to capture broad systemic features. As we have tried to demonstrate, the concepts of 'empire' and 'imperialism', and with them entire aggregates of experiences, hopes and ambitions, have returned, albeit with different implications and ramifications than before. The semantic struggle over the concepts is intense. That struggle is also a well-suited portal for understanding 'empire' and hence hierarchy in world politics today.

Conclusion

Over the last twenty years, IR scholars have staked out enough turns for an entire downhill slope: the linguistic turn, the aesthetic turn, the practice turn, the sociological turn, the relational turn. Any downhill skier knows that traversing turns is first and foremost a question of technique. So far, however, extant IR scholarship has largely neglected questions of method and methodology. In this piece, we have presented one approach to studying hierarchy in a linguistically and sociologically informed way, and we have applied that methodology to the study of 'empire'.

Empire started life as a Latin verb: *imperare*, to command. Commanding is enacting hierarchy; someone commands, others follow. In most imperial traditions, there is some kind of link between the commandment of the human in charge and God's commandment. Our major examples here were Byzantium and the Western European tradition, including Russia. In Byzantium, there was supposed to be isomorphism between God's realm and the emperor's realm, with the emperor being God's representative on earth. In the Western European tradition, by contrast, empire came to be used as an opposing concept to *sacerdotal*, the area under the Pope's command. The two opposing usages point to two very different hierarchical constellations. With European expansion, empire came to be used for the constellation of homeland and overseas and, in the case of Russia, overland possessions. Empire emerged as the natural way to organise a progress-oriented political entity, with the homeland hierarchically leading the possessions. This understanding was challenged by the French *philosophes*, who saw in empire a case of foreign rule which was bad *because* foreign. In the 19th century and into the 20th, imperialism became a battle-concept, and was

increasingly used for what others did. By the Second World War, it had more or less vanished as a self-referential concept. After the end of the Cold War, it staged a quick return.

This changing conceptual history of empire is, among other things, the story of how hierarchy has been inscribed in different ways. The normalisation and spread of different concepts has systematic implications for what kinds of social effects are considered normal, and these effects systematically differentiate between the life chances of different groups. The semantic struggle between different concepts is a power struggle. If hierarchy in world politics is to be studied in a socially rooted way, which is to say without limiting our field of inquiry to the states system, then conceptual history offers itself as a particularly apt methodology for doing so.

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ⁱ We choose this indirect form because the expression was in fact not used in the Roman Empire; it was first used in Europe in the 1800s. The reasoning the expression refers to was well known long before. Nuances like these are typical nuggets for conceptual historians.

ⁱⁱ Hermeneutics begins and ends with the life world of the actors; it seeks in its analyses to recreate the world that the actors experience. The most important objection discourse analysis raises to such an approach is that hermeneutics easily misses the conditions for action that the actors perceive and out of which they co-create their room of action. There is a materiality, a regularity, and a slowness inherent in the social that hermeneutics fails to grasp. Conceptual history can in this context be viewed as an empirical solution to this dilemma; by displaying the different life worlds in chronological order and by showing the breaks between them, they do justice to the richness of the life worlds, at the same time as they show how earlier life worlds and other conditions combine to make up the conditions for action in a specific life world. A theoretical problem is thereby tackled partly with the help of empirical research.

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of Europe was also in use around the time of Charlemagne, only to disappear later (see Neumann 1999).

^{iv} We noted in the introduction that conceptual comparison of the imperial ‘Western’ and Chinese/steppe traditions are not our topic in this article. Since the two meet in Russia, however, we should at least note the historical literature that tries to gauge the relative impact of the two; see Cherniavsky (1959/1970) and Neumann (forthcoming).

^v For a recent discussion from within IR fastening on the concept of civilisation, see Bowden (2009: 47–75).

^{vi} A concept used to refer to a future communist Europe was ‘the United States of Europe’ (see Neumann 1999).

^{vii} Stephanson (2009) later confessed to thinking that the end of the Cold War would bring an end to American exceptionalism. He acknowledges being wrong, but now puts his trust in the possible destabilising effects of the choice of Barack Obama as president.

^{viii} In this article we will refer to a transcript of the debate itself, published on the organiser’s website. See <http://www.aei.org/events/filter..eventID.428/transcript.asp> (21 September 2009). Quotations without any other specific reference are taken from this source.