LANGUAGE AND POLITICS, POLITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE:  
A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, ACTION AND  
CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

by

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Abstract

This essay is premised on two assumptions: first, that concepts change their meaning; second, that the examination of the relationship between language and action—two central components of the public sphere—illuminates the process of change. Three models of conceptual change are critically discussed through their language-action axis. The first, adduced by German historian of concepts Reinhart Koselleck, assumes that conceptual change results from a gap between language and action. The second, put forward by historian of political thought Quentin Skinner, argues that conceptual change is produced by political theorists that are doing something when writing; language, according to this model is (sometimes) a form of action. The third model is derived from the American PC movement, which, it is argued here, presents us with a theory and a practice of conceptual change. According to this model, conceptual change results from a deliberate change of language by social agents. Language, as maintained by this model, is the world; action cannot be discussed separately from language since everything exists only through language. As we move from one model to the next we see that the place language assumes in both political theory and practice is increasing in relation to, and at the expense of, action.

This essay argues that the mid-twentieth century “linguistic turn,” coupled with the growing influence of postmodernism on political theory and practice, results in a distorted picture of the polis. This weakens the ability of political theory to make intelligible the world around us, and also its effectiveness as a guide for action. This tendency must be remedied if political theory and practice wishes to remain relevant to the public sphere.
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Introduction

Revolution thus ran its course from city to city, and the places which it arrived at last, from having heard what had been done before, carried to a still greater excess the refinement of their inventions...Words had to change their ordinary meaning...Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any.\(^1\)

Reality, it is sometimes said, is more surprising than the imagination. That George Orwell has become a source of inspiration for American neoconservatives in their battle against the new left's ongoing effort to change the social agenda, even Orwell could not have foreseen. The American “politically correct” (PC) movement, on the other hand, is undoubtedly “Room 101” for neoconservatives. Not only does PC threaten to revolutionize the way Americans define themselves, it has singled out one of the most cherished neoconservative social institutions – the university – as its principal target. The literary exchange between these two groups is emotionally charged. From the left, Richard Feldstein criticizes neoconservatives – who have taken upon themselves the task of “confuting...critics who foreground issues of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation in their analyses,” – for fabricating the PC myth of “robotic professors who mindlessly move in lockstep, adhering to a program of monolithic indoctrination.”\(^2\) On the right, Dinesh D’Souza is no less dramatic when he writes:

Within the tall gates and old buildings, a new worldview is consolidating itself. The transformation of American campuses is so sweeping that it is no exaggeration to call it an academic revolution. The distinctive insignia of this revolution can be witnessed on any major campus in America today, and in all major aspects of university life.\(^3\)

The American PC debate is often described as a “culture war;” and, insofar as language is culture it is not surprising that in this war language is the battlefield, the weapon and the

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principal bearer of this controversy. From the left, the appropriateness and ability of the "liberal language" to serve as a proper and effective tool of communication is questioned; instead, a new language — a new conception of the world — is advanced. For neoconservatives, on the other hand, letting go of the "language of liberalism" (which, ironically, becomes "traditional") means the dismantling of everything American. Indeed, since the 1960's American society is in a state of social and conceptual flux; both language and society are changing their meaning. To the extent that PC is a "language war," this intriguing process of change is illuminated when we examine what both neoconservatives and new leftists are doing with language, and what action they are taking in order to achieve change.

In other words, thinking about language, action, and conceptual transformation this thesis asks: what is the role that language and action assume in the process of conceptual change? Why is this question important? Wittgenstein alludes to the significance of this query when he ruminates on the concept "Festivity" and writes: "We connect it with merrymaking; in another age it may have been connected with fear and dread. What we call "wit" and "humor" doubtless did not exist in other ages. And both are constantly changing." In this same spirit, this essay takes as its point of departure a simple statement: concepts change their meaning. Yet, what seems at first glance to be nothing but a mere truism immediately becomes more complex when we pause to consider the parts separately from their whole. To begin with, what is a "concept"? Is it the same as a "word" or an 'idea'? Granted that the meaning of concepts changes, why

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does this occur? How and when do they acquire new meaning? And, most importantly, why is the investigation of this process of interest to the student of political thought?

"When language changes meaning, the world changes meaning, the world changes meaning, and we are part of the world." From the point of view of political theory, it can be said that when political concepts change their meaning, the political world changes meaning, and this change is of utmost importance for the student of the "political world." For man, Aristotle has proclaimed, is "a political animal." Thus, the "political" is understood here in a broad sense. It is inspired by Hannah Arendt's approach to the "political" as an experience which springs from the interaction of "men in the plural, that is men insofar as they live and move and act in the world [and] can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves." At the same time the perception of the "political" seeks to remain loyal to what Sheldon Wolin calls the "public concern:" "All of the major theories of the past were informed by "public concern," a quality which was not incidental to the activity, but fundamental to the very notion of being engaged in political theory." The process of conceptual change in the political sphere implies social interaction and as such is a "public concern" from the point of view of political theory. Three models of conceptual transformation and innovation are critically examined in this essay, and all three models are approached from the language-action axis.

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The first model, put forward by German historian of concepts Reinhart Koselleck, suggests that conceptual change results from a crisis; the crisis, however, is an outcome of a dissonance between language and the action that it is supposedly describing. The second model, adduced by the British historian of political thought Quentin Skinner, assumes that conceptual change is intentional, and occurs as individuals do something when speaking (or writing). Language in this model is welded to action and is understood as a form of "speech-act." Nevertheless, it is important to underline that "speech-acts" are understood as a response to action. Conceptual change occurs as agents, in their use of language, struggle to present certain actions in more or less favorable language. The third model derives from the American PC theory, which, it will be argued, is a movement of conceptual change premised on the assumption that language is our only access to the social sphere. The theory and practice of PC views language as the primary force of the polis; language defines and makes intelligible the actions that are taken in this sphere. As such, conceptual change is sought almost exclusively in language; to change action one must concentrate one's efforts on changing language.

Since concepts exist only within a language-action scheme, it is necessary to appreciate the role that these two defining entities play in the social life before conceptual change can be explained (perhaps even anticipated). In all three models conceptual change is premised on an a priori understanding of the role and significance of language and action in the social sphere. The administration of the polis necessitates both talking and doing but the balance between these activities varies from one polis to the next and raises serious questions: What is the relationship between language and action? Is there a difference between them? Does language define action, or is it the other way around? Is
language a form of action? Is action a form of language? Do we control our language, or are we controlled by it? The three models that are presented in this essay grapple with these questions and at the same time seek to unearth the source and reason of conceptual change.

After critically discussing each model on its own terms, it becomes apparent that the importance of language in both political theory and practice has increased over the years while that of action is steadily diminishing. This conclusion is most evident in the case of the PC movement where the predominance of language leads to a unification of language with action. The growing portion of language in the "political," stems from the fact that both political theory and practice, more than in the past, are informed by the problems and methods of linguistic philosophy and postmodernism. The mid-century "linguistic turn" coupled with the growing influence of the postmodern "attitude" have distorted the much needed balance between language and action in the polis. Political theory and practice, unlike linguistic philosophy and postmodernism, cannot afford being oblivious to action.

Since the purpose of this thesis is to examine the relationship between language and action in the process of conceptual change, it does not refer to a single body of knowledge but rather explores various disciplines such as history, linguistic philosophy and political theory. It is the subject matter that compels the use of multiple bodies of knowledge. In part this is because those who study conceptual change have done so, in part because the relationship between language and action and the process of conceptual change has implications that go beyond political thought. Since all of us use language and act in the world, this crucial relationship is of interest in many disciplines.
Thus, in the first chapter, we begin by discussing the importance of language and action in the *polis* – both Greek and metaphoric – and examine theories that have articulated this relationship and thereby altered the way we think about society. It then considers what is meant by "concept" and reviews the development of conceptual history. The study of conceptual history in political thought is largely a postwar phenomenon and is a field of study which has attracted considerable attention from prominent scholars. But while in the immediate postwar period the orientation was towards central analytical terms in "the modern vocabulary of social and political understanding," today scholars of this "new intellectual genre" are increasingly studying the actual concepts used by "agents" in political discourses of the past. Two schools of thought in particular are engaged in this type of study. The first, the so-called Cambridge School, which is identified with J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, defines a trend of research known as linguistic contextualism or intentionalism. The second, the German *Begriffsgeschichte*, which is identified with Reinhart Koselleck, focuses on the historical recovery and the historical development of central political concepts.

The second chapter examines the models adduced by Koselleck and Skinner. Although they share a common interest in the history of political concepts and a mutual dissatisfaction with the methodological tools used in the past in this field of study the two scholars are found to be at loggerheads about other central defining aspects. A major difference lies in the understanding of the relation between language and action and in the source of conceptual change.

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10 Ibid.
The third chapter is a critical investigation of the PC movement and its assumptions regarding language, action and conceptual change. To the extent that the study of the history of political concepts is the study of history and the study of language in history, the story of PC provides a particularly illuminating case study of the way language, action, and conceptual change are perceived today in political theory and practice.
Chapter 1
Language, Action and the History of Concepts

Language and Action in the Polis

The history of language and politics begins in the Greek polis, with the emergence of the Aristotelian bios politikos. What is a bios politikos? How does one engage in this type of living? Hannah Arendt illuminates this way of being in her discussion of the term vita activa, which refers to “three fundamental human activities: labor, work, action.”¹ Labor corresponds to the natural/biological process of the body. Work relates to the unnaturalness of the human existence, it belongs to the artificial world of things, within which humans have their homes. Action, contrary to labor and work, exists without the intervention of things; it bears a direct relation to the human condition of plurality – to the fact that the world is inhabited by men, not Man. As such, “action” is the “political activity par excellence.”² The bios politikos transcends the necessities of labor and work; it is the life of one who has freely chosen to devote oneself to the polis.³ “Of all activities necessary and present in human communities,” Arendt notes, “only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the bios politikos, namely action (praxis) and speech (lexis) out of which rises the realm of human affairs from which everything merely necessary or useful is excluded.”⁴

Manifestly, the designation of “action” has gradually expanded over the centuries and generations since Aristotle and the Greek polis, reaching its opposite extreme with

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² Ibid, pp. 7-9.
³ The other two action-driven life are the life of enjoying bodily pleasure and the life of the philosopher. All three types of living are concerned with the search for the “beautiful,” that which is not necessary or merely useful. Ibid, pp. 13-4.
⁴ Ibid, pp. 24-5.
the feminist aphorism “the personal is political” and the postmodern assertion that “everything is political.” Yet *praxis* and *lexis* remain constitutive of our political lives, between them our human affairs rise and take shape. True, we have seen a change in the dichotomy that language and action represent. In the Greek *polis* language meant persuasions and reliance on rhetoric, while action meant sheer violence, and as such, a pre-political act carried out only outside the *polis*, in the private sphere or amongst despotic societies. In our times, as distinct from the Greek *polis*, the very act of drawing the line between language and action is political. Yet the place that language and action assume in the political life, in both the minimalist Aristotelian and maximalist postmodern perceptions of the “political,” has neither diminished nor been severely modified over the years. Language, action and their interrelationship, continue to control our social and political lives.

“Taking action,” then, is what we do in the *polis*, in the public sphere. But what is meant by “language” in this context? What language do we speak in the “*polis*”? Terrence Ball makes an analytical distinction between “natural language” and “moral” or “political” language in order to characterize the language of the *polis*, the language that the student of political concepts is concerned with. “In referring to this or that ‘language,’” he writes, “I do not mean the natural languages analysed by linguistics – Attic Greek, for example, or modern English – but allude to what one might as a first cut call a moral or political language.” In other words, while true that all languages are social artifacts and hence are not “natural” in the literal sense of the word, within language we find “discourses” (Ball) or “sub-languages” (Pocock) which convey, as

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James Boyd White puts it, "shared conceptions of the world, shared manner and values, shared resources and expectations and procedures for speech and thought [through which] communities are in fact defined and constituted." It is this "political" or "moral" language that stores cultural identity on one hand, and the language that shapes and defines the way we think and see the world on the other. When this language changes – when "our shared conceptions of the world" are modified – we change too, and vice versa. However, differentiating between the so-called “social” and “natural” language, as the next section reveals, is not a straightforward act to execute since it involves selecting and hence theorizing.

Having identified the two boundary markers of this essay – the language and action of the polis – we must identify more closely the way in which these two are approached. Conceptual history and the history of concepts will be our guide in tracing political change. As we shall see, concepts tie language and action together, and allow us to examine the process of change. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, to introduce theories that articulate the role of language and action in the social sphere and have exercised a critical influence on the study of concepts. Second, to reflect on the concept of “concept” and to underline the importance of studying concepts as means of gaining insight into the political sphere. Third, to introduce the two major schools of thought engaged in the study of concepts, the so-called Cambridge School and the German Begriffsgeschichte (history of concepts). Two prominent representatives of these schools – Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner – will be our focus in the next chapter.

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It was noted above that the dichotomy represented by language and action has undergone change and expansion since the Greek *polis.* Here we will consider how philosophers of language and history have grappled with this dichotomy and sought to grasp its essential meaning and its influence on our lives. It must be stated though, that we confine ourselves to the “modern era,” by which is meant, by and large, central developments since the late nineteenth century. Insofar as conceptual change is a product of the relationship language/action we will ask: How does social language shape social reality and vice versa? What types of relationships language and society entertain? How does the history of concepts help us come to grips with these questions? The founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de-Saussure (1857-1913) is usually seen as the first theorist who made distinctions in language that contained far-reaching implications on the way we approach social analysis.\(^8\) Underlying Saussure’s theory is a linguistic structure of binary oppositions, two of which are of interest here; the first pertains to the relationship between language and society, the second to the question of change in language.

The first set of binary opposition is the *langue* (language) and the *parole* (speech). *Langue* specifies the abstract structure of language, the part not susceptible to individual modification or deliberate change; the *parole* denotes the “private” or “personal” aspect of language, it signifies the individual’s selection of words from the *langue* when speaking.\(^9\) According to Saussure, *langue* rather than *parole* is the real subject matter of linguistic analysis since language rather than speech contains the principles of


classification in light of which speech becomes intelligible. *Langue*, Michael Shapiro explains, operates as a constraint over *parole*; because the speaker must choose his words and concepts (and hence his ideas) from an existing closed system, it follows that these are predetermined by the range of meanings and interpretations that are available in language.\footnote{M. J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) p. 130.} From this follows, that not only the range of possible speech is fixed, but so is the scope of possible actions, since action can only be interpreted in light of existing language: “the possibilities of action...exist in the language of culture, and the actions that actually emerge are presented as a result of the controlling interpretations, those with general legitimacy.”\footnote{Ibid.} In other words, one cannot do what one has no words to describe.

The second set of oppositions pertains to the phenomenon of change in language and is encapsulated in the dichotomy between “synchronic” and “diachronic” states: the former refers to the condition of language at any given moment in the present, while the latter designates the existence of language through history. This distinction allowed linguistics to focus on the state of the language as they found it, so to speak, rather than rely on its history as the explanatory force over language. The point is not that a language does not have a history, but rather that language and its history should be analytically disentangled.\footnote{P.J. Corfield, “Introduction: Historians and Language,” *Language, History, and Class*, pp. 5-6.} Linguistic analysis, according to Saussure, should focus on the synchronic state of affairs, for it reflects the language that the community of speakers “really speaks.”\footnote{F.R. Dallmayr, *Language and Politics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) p. 58.} This alone may not be of special significance to the historian of political thought; but, since change in language occurs and registers in the synchronic level, it offers the historian of political thought a tool for detecting political change: “Everything
diachronic in language is diachronic only by virtue of speaking. For speaking contains the seeds of all changes.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, to the extent that our political lives consist of speaking, and to the extent that they change, language "as we find it" becomes our compass for determining new directions of long-term social and political changes.

Saussure's theory is associated with a larger structuralist tradition, which "interprets human conduct as the surface practices emanating from a deeper structure that represents the constitution of human thought."\textsuperscript{15} Michel Foucault (1926-1984) a philosopher of history and culture shares some of the assumptions put forward by structuralist theorists,\textsuperscript{16} and has greatly influenced the study of conceptual history, especially the Anglo-American tradition. Like Skinner's and Koselleck's, Foucault's philosophy of history is rooted in his historical studies and as such it is "not concerned with the absolute truth of history, but with forms of historical knowledge which are provisional, fragmentary and plural."\textsuperscript{17} As was the case with Saussure, only two concepts in Foucault's philosophical reflections on history, those deemed most relevant from the point of view of this essay, will be discussed here: his formulation of "discursive practices" and the "archeological" method he develops as means of recovering these practices.

\textsuperscript{15} M. J. Shapiro, \textit{Language and Political Understanding}, p. 133. Roland Barthes, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacque Lacan and to some extent Michel Foucault follow the structuralist approach in their works. 
\textsuperscript{16} Although his explicit rejection of this association, expressed, for example, in his "Forward to the English Edition" in \textit{The Order of Things} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970) p. xiv. Foucault is often classified by scholars as a structuralists since his analyses of history and culture, discussed below, focuses on structures of discourse. He differs from "classical" structuralism in his rejection of the fundamental structuralist assumption that "surface practices" convey deeper meanings.
Foucault’s approach to history is premised on a rejection of the traditional divisions of history into “vast unities like ‘periods’ and ‘centuries,’” and recommends instead comprehending history as “the phenomenon of rupture, of discontinuity.”\(^{18}\) Subscribing to this position, Foucault maintains, requires the historian to pose a new set of guiding questions, since “the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of divisions, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations.”\(^{19}\) By emphasizing discontinuities Foucault attempts to overcome the traditional chronological approach to history in which one age is seen as giving rise to the next. History as perceived by Foucault consists of a series of radical breaks, each break results in a wholly new understanding of what it means to be human.\(^{20}\) As such, Foucault’s approach to history is concerned, first and foremost, with conceptual change and movement. Once the study of history is freed from the “myth of continuity” we are left, Foucault asserts, with historical materials that are in their “raw, neutral state, a population of events in the space of discourse in general.”\(^{21}\) “Discourse in general” becomes the subject matter of the historian. The turn to discourse is based on Foucault’s fundamental assumption that


\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 5.

\(^{20}\) Foucault calls the time between these “breaks” *episteme*. Each *episteme* is believed to rest on a distinct set of principles, which determine and classify the modes and structures of knowledge. In his *Order of Things*, Foucault describes the purpose of his research as “an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what *a priori*, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed...” (pp. xxi-xxii). Foucault identifies three *episteme*: “sixteenth century” (knowledge is based on God), “classical” (knowledge is based on classification) and “modern” (knowledge is based on empirical sciences.) At the end of the *Order of Things*, Foucault hints that the modern *episteme* is approaching its end, though he does not specify the new terms on which knowledge will be based in the “postmodern” era.

\(^{21}\) M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 27.
"language uses persons...[and] discourses, the various forms in which language is
actualized, are responsible for the deployment of both objects and subjects."22

What becomes immediately important is the equation that Foucault assumes
between discourse (language) and practice (action). A practice – e.g. medicine, grammar,
or politics – is constituted through its “discourse,” the type and substance of the
statements it makes use of. A “discursive practice” is a “a body of anonymous, historical
rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a
given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area.”23 History is “discourse in
general,” and it consists of more specialized discourses, i.e. “discursive practices.” The
study of history, then, becomes the study of “discursive practices;” Foucault calls this
approach to history “archeology.” Discourses are likened to the “monuments” of history;
they are the “objects...the things left by the past”24 which it is now the duty of the
historian to situate within a historical discourse. “Archeology,” Foucault writes, “tries to
define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are
concealed or revealed in discourse; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as
practices obeying certain rules.”25

Both Saussure and Foucault have exercised a tremendous influence on many
disciplines, the history of political thought being merely one of them. Yet, it is important
to underline the extent to which these thinkers “live” in the works of both Skinner and
Koselleck. Saussure’s influence on Koselleck is immediately apparent. Not only does
Koselleck speak explicitly about “diachronic structures” and “synchronic structures,” but,

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22 M. J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding*, pp. 145-6. This assumption is but one example for
structuralistic foundations in Foucault’s philosophy.
as we shall see, his methodological approach is ultimately based on binary oppositions such as language/action and long-term/short-term transformations. Saussure has also had a considerable influence on the Cambridge School scholar J.G.A. Pocock. Pocock's Kuhnian paradigmatic analysis of political discourse is based on the opposition between *langue* and *parole*, as well as on the assumption that the *langue* determines our actions and therefore the historian of political thought must recover the *langue* before he can interpret political action. Foucault's spirit looms large in Skinner's work. In his historical writings Skinner follows Foucault's "archeological" method as a means of excavating the past; his approach to history, a disengaged historical survey, is recommended by Foucault; and finally, Skinner's philosophy of history shares with Foucault the assumption that history is driven by a succession of power relations.

Notwithstanding, the contribution of Saussure and Foucault to the development of conceptual history is most evident in the methodological orientation and vocabulary adopted by historians of concepts. The study of concepts, though, was as much influenced by the postwar philosophical revolution as it was by Saussure and Foucault. The mid-century "linguistic turn" embedded the study of conceptual history in a new linguistic philosophy, a new ontological understanding of "what is." In fact, it can be argued that conceptual history, as it is practiced today, is to a large extent a product of this "turn."

The "turn" was carried out by linguistic philosophers, most notably J.L. Austin (1911-1960) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who turned away from the

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27 Wittgenstein's philosophy is usually divided into two phases. In his early writings, exemplified in *The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein was defending the logical positivist approach. Only in his
prevailing logical positivism which, they argued, was no longer considered to be a satisfactory approach for addressing philosophical problems, and instead claimed that “ordinary language,” — the language that tells us how things are in the world, — is the only appropriate subject for philosophy, since everything that exists, exists in language.28 Logical positivism, the “scientific philosophy,” emerged in the nineteen Twenties and Thirties of the last century in Vienna, and purported to be the remedy for the non-sensical metaphysical speculation which, according to the members of what became known as the Vienna Circle, characterized traditional philosophy. Exemplified in the works of Ernst Mach, Bertrand Russell, Rudolf Carnap, A.J. Ayer and the early Wittgenstein, logical positivists sought to make the nature of meaningful statements depend on the nature of what could be empirically known.29 Reflecting on this movement, Ayer writes: “I was entirely convinced...that for a sentence to be literally meaningful it was necessary and sufficient that it expressed a proposition the truth or falsehood of which could be determined either by empirical observation or solely in virtue of its form.”30 Metaphysical philosophy, the logical positivists held, was based on nothing and therefore meant nothing. Statements, sentences and words were considered meaningful only if they

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28 Although both Wittgenstein and Austin contributed equally to the formulation of “linguistic philosophy,” they pursued different agendas. While Wittgenstein, in his later writings, is concerned with the diversity of functions we perform in language, Austin focused mainly on one type of non-descriptive sentences, which he called “performatives,” referring to sentences that were said to do something other than state or describe. M. J. Shapiro, Language and Political Understanding, pp. 50-1. We shall come back to Austin's theory in the next chapter.


were related to empirical observation, or if their meaning could be logically derived from observation. Truth, in other words, had to be based on experience.\textsuperscript{31}

Against the claim that meaning is based on non-linguistic foundations – that is, on experience and observation – Austin and Wittgenstein, among others, proclaimed that there are neither facts outside our “ordinary language,” nor is there a “reality” other than that which is represented in language. Speaking, according to this approach, was understood as an activity and words gained “meaning by virtue of what speakers do with them, what actions or ‘speech acts’ they perform with them;”\textsuperscript{32} be that referring, describing, explaining or any other linguistic action. Words, Wittgenstein argued in one of his most famous formulations, are meaningful only within their “language game.” “The term ‘language-game,’” Wittgenstein wrote, “is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a form of life.”\textsuperscript{33} A language-game, then, is a “form of life,” a way of acting in the world; it is not grounded in metaphysics nor is it based on rational foundations, it is grounded in practice, “woven into human activity...”\textsuperscript{34} It exhausts the whole sphere of language and action since

the knowledge of a language, the ability to “play” language games which are part of a culture, form...the horizon of our understanding of reality and our capacity to act in it; they form the background of our behaviour, both from the point of view of our acting and from the point of view of the interpretation of action.\textsuperscript{35}

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\textsuperscript{31} R. Nieli, \textit{Wittgenstein: From Mysticism to Ordinary Language} (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987) pp. 7-8. In order to determine whether a statement was meaningful, logical positivists developed the “verification principle;” before a statement was considered “meaningful” its truth-conditions, that is, its accessibility to experience, had to be shown. B. S. Gower, “Introduction: The Criterion of Significance,” in \textit{Logical Positivism in Retrospect}, pp. 8-9.

\textsuperscript{32} T. Ball, \textit{Transforming Political Discourse}, p. 5.


\textsuperscript{34} J. Tully, “The Pen is a Mighty Sword,” \textit{Meaning and Context}, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{35} D.M. de-Souza Filho, \textit{Language and Action} (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984) p. 3.
Critical of the strict procedures employed by logical positivists in an effort to verify the truth, "ordinary language" philosophers claimed that no particular set of procedures leads to "meaning" and that none of the actions carried out in language are "privileged, much less paradigmatic of what meaning (really) is. Nor does any particular set of linguistic practices, e.g. scientific discourse, set a standard of meaningfulness that all "inferior" discourses (e.g. moral, or aesthetic discourse) should seek to emulate."\(^{36}\) Richard Rorty sums up the revolutionary essence of linguistic philosophy when he writes: "linguistic philosophy [is] the view that philosophical problems are problems which can be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use."\(^{37}\)

The "linguistic turn," then, reduced all that there is to language, and, as will be seen immediately, it had a tremendous impact on the approach to the study of political thought and on the development of conceptual history. Yet its influence is not confined to theory alone. As the third chapter of this essay shows, the assumption that language is our only access to reality, and the idea that a change in action is a result of a change in language, lies at the heart of the American PC movement, and informs its practices.

\*\* Two Concepts of "Concept" \*\*

We have seen that enunciating the relationship between language and action is closely interwoven with formulating the "social." And while language and action represent the limits of the social world, concepts are "caught" between those two boundary markers, helping us to map more closely the content of the social, rather than

\(^{36}\) T. Ball, *Transforming Political Discourse*, p. 5.

its confines. It is useful to begin thinking about concepts by considering the difference between the study of concepts and the study of ideas, as this will clarify the sense in which “concepts” are understood in this essay. The proximity and interchangeability between “concepts” and “ideas” are explicated in Isaiah Berlin’s celebrated essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Anyone familiar with the essay will readily agree that by “two concepts,” Berlin means two ways of life, two systems of thought. In other words, negative and positive liberty, are two moral structures. Ideas, for Berlin, exist outside the human sphere:

It is only a very vulgar historical materialism that denies the power of ideas, and says that ideals are mere material interests in disguise. It may be that, without the pressure of social forces, political ideas are stillborn: what is certain is that these forces, unless they clothe themselves in ideas, remain blind and undirected.  

For Berlin, concepts are “ideas,” the highest form of abstraction and rationalization, and are believed to exist in the natural world, prior to language and society. Society, as Berlin says, merely forces ideas to materialize and words are but symbols or names for these ideas.

But, as we saw, the assumption that ideas exist prior to language was fervently contested in the past half century, since the “linguistic turn.” As the attention shifted to language, now posited as the sole creator of reality, nothing was thought to exist outside the spheres of language, “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world,” as Wittgenstein eloquently puts it. If language sets the boundaries of our world, it follows that whatever cannot be articulated in words cannot be conceived and hence does not exist. This approach views language as the primary container of what is human.

Language and what we do with it becomes the sole protagonist in the study of human affairs, a social institution that defines and embodies philosophical categories such as knowledge and meaning. Concepts, according to this view, still represent ideas, but these ideas are a product of language and are bounded by history, which can – indeed must – be recovered for the meaning of concepts to be construed. In other words, concepts are not “forces clothed in words,” they are what people make them to be according to their temporal circumstances and immediate needs. It is in this sense that the term “concept” is used here.

The difference, then, between the study of ideas and the study of concepts as these two branches of knowledge have been practiced, is primarily a difference of origins. But this difference cannot be undermined. In their latter application concepts are tied to the history of their use, which in turn suggests that people have power over them. Amongst other fields of thought, this new ontological approach was embraced by some historians of political thought and has had far reaching implications on the way scholars approach this body of knowledge. The history of political thought, it seems, has been irrevocably transformed to the history of people talking. We will return to this transformation in the concluding part of this essay, where we will ask whether the turn to language has come at too high a price from the perspective of political thought. That being said, subscribing to the position that language is all that there is, does not tell us much about the ways in which language actually interacts with action, or how it influences social action and why concepts are important to this process.

History tells us that meanings of concepts change over time. Earlier it was argued that conceptual change implies a change in our shared values and morals; now we move
to consider the relationship between conceptual change and political change. Concepts are components of the “political language.” Concepts become “political” not only because they are used in the political discourse, but also because their meaning is contested; concepts are “social institutions,” thus their meaning and function is prone to debate, control and manipulation. As a result of the things people do with concepts, they change:

Conceptual change is one imaginative consequence of political actors criticizing and attempting to resolve the contradiction which they discover or generate in the complex web of their beliefs, actions, and practices as they try to understand and change the world around them.40

And since concepts constitute the “political language,” it seems useful to trace conceptual change as a means of recovering political change, since “to understand conceptual change is in large part to understand political change, and vice versa.”41 How large this “part” is varies from one theory to another. The degree to which concepts and the “real world” reflect, influence and change one another and the question of what are these forces of change, lie at the very core of this essay and will occupy us in the next two chapters as we examine the three models of conceptual change.

What is the purpose of this endeavor? Why is it important for us to know how our predecessors used words, or, put differently, what they meant by them? “The ultimate aim of history” Collingwood teaches us, “is not to know the past but to understand the present.”42 The task of the historian of concepts is no different. Language is successive and is passed down to the present loaded with layers of accumulated meanings; by tracing the history of concepts we hope to recover the footsteps of our ancestors in anticipation

41 Ibid, pp. 24-5.
of illuminating the links between past and present, illustrating and perhaps even explaining social and political change. As was noted earlier, the English Cambridge School and the German *Begriffsgeschichte* are presently the two major schools of thought engaged in the study of concepts as a means of studying social and intellectual history. The roots and goals of these schools are the focus of the next two sections.

*The German Begriffsgeschichte* (BG)

In the broadest sense of the word, the study of concepts is not a new phenomenon in the German scholarly world. Hegel is believed to have been the first philosopher to use the term BG,\(^{43}\) and throughout the nineteenth century German philosophers investigated the origins of the terms they used. In theological faculties too, historians of dogma dedicated themselves to the study of words and concepts.\(^{44}\) The current trend of BG, however, has grown out of two more recent German traditions: *Geistesgeschichte* (history of the mind and/or spirit) most identified with Wilhelm Dilthey and *Ideengeschichte* (history of ideas) exemplified in the work of Friedrich Meinecke.

In his work, Dilthey (1831-1911) developed a "set of practices used to write epochal or cultural history in terms of shared assumptions, presupposition, or Zeitgeist."\(^{45}\) His project was informed by both philosophy and history as he attempted to study the "whole" nature of man, and the history of the mind. This *a priori* philosophical quest took an historical turn when Dilthey reached the conclusion that human nature is

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manifested through experience and thus entails the revival of the past. His dual interest in history (experience) and philosophy (mind) naturally led Dilthey to writing a history of ideas.\textsuperscript{46} Initially, he attempted to accomplish his objective by writing purely descriptive psychology, that is, the facts of consciousness; his repeated failures to achieve this goal led him to Schleiermacher and the hermeneutic school - the belief that all historical knowledge is discerned through the interpretation of facts in the context of a larger whole, which, paradoxically, could only be understood through its parts.\textsuperscript{47} Ideas, according to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, existed prior to language hence texts must be understood as expressions of their authors’ thoughts and intentions. Accordingly, the historian’s task was to “relive” past texts in order to excavate their “spirit.”\textsuperscript{48} Only then could history be properly understood.

Like Dilthey, Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) was concerned with the human experience as means of arriving at a comprehensive universality of the human nature. His philosophy of history viewed the individual as the “analytical” unit upon which philosophical generalizations should be based. A descendant of the historical idealism movement, Meinecke sought to “capture the existential uniqueness within historical events and to penetrate the motivations of the human person.”\textsuperscript{49} Idealism is apparent in Meinecke’s \textit{Ideengeschichte}; an idea, according to idealists, is a mysterious and transcendental active force that dominates history. As such, individuals – persons but also nations – were understood as animators of ideas. The historian’s task was to penetrate

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these ideas by means of his imagination, he had to "see" – visualizes as well as understand them – in an almost primordial sense and to have an antecedent relation to them.\(^{50}\)

Countering these approaches, BG historians, most notably Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, rejected the claim that political and social concepts merely represent basic abstract patterns such as "mind," "spirit" or "idea." According to the BG historians, that approach separated concepts and ideas from their political and social environment, in which they were used as weapons in political debates.\(^{51}\) Seeking to remedy this, BG presented itself as an alternative method, aiming to recover the history of concepts as they appear "in the texts of individual thinkers and bodies of thought in the past."\(^{52}\) Concepts were identified as the key unit because, as Koselleck's asserts, studying the history of concepts makes it possible "to survey contemporary space of experience and horizon of expectation, and to investigate the political and social functions of concepts, together with their specific modality of usage."\(^{53}\) Concepts, in other words, embody the past (experience) the present (usage) as well as the future (expectation).

Three major projects have been applying BG methodology in the study of concepts: (1) *A Dictionary of Philosophy on Historical Principles* (first volume published in 1971) (2) *Basic Concepts in History: A Dictionary on Historical Principles of Political and Social Language in Germany* (first volume published in 1972) (3) *A Handbook of Basic Political and Social Concepts in France, 1680-1820* (first volume appeared in

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1985).\(^{54}\) In fact the small number of books is deceiving. Since these projects are dictionaries, BG historians have produced a vast and rich body of literature. By 1995, for example, eight volumes of the *Handbook* were already published containing over 11,000 double-columned pages. Based on these dictionaries Melvin Richter defines BG as:

[A] generic term to designate all three of these scholarly practices used to study the history of concepts. It is thus the choice of concepts as units of analysis in the history of thought which distinguishes BG from alternative methods focusing on other topics: individual authors, texts, schools, tradition, persisting problems, forms of argument, style of thought, discourses, ideologies.\(^{55}\)

As this definition indicates, Richter's access to the German BG is, for the most part, through the practice rather than the method. In his discussions about BG Richter tends to emphasizes the historical over the linguistic perspective as the core purpose of this project, and his analysis is founded on a close textual reading of the three dictionaries, in effect making the BG methodological agenda secondary to the historical insights that it presents. Other scholars approach this project from a more linguistic point of view, accentuating the synchronic/diachronic linguistic analysis provided by the BG historians.\(^{56}\)

Although scholars differ on the major thrust of the BG project, some emphasizing the historical aspect of it and others the linguistic, to choose one over the other would seem to miss the central point that Koselleck is making. BG, Koselleck argues, designates an "autonomous sphere"\(^{57}\) where society and language meet; it is at this conjunction that history is created. Concepts epitomize this coming together of history and language. The

\(^{54}\) In German, these dictionaries are titled: (1) *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historische Lexicon zur politisch-sozialer Sprache in Deutschland* (2) *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie* (3) *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*. M. Richter, *The History of Social and Political Concepts*, p. 3.

\(^{55}\) Ibid, p. 4.


\(^{57}\) Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 80.
choice of encyclopedic dictionaries as the preferred format for presenting BG adds another dimension to the balance sought between history and language, since it enables the “autonomous sphere” to be expressed externally as well as internally, and designates both language and history an equal role. As opposed to the position taken by Richter, here BG is approached from its methodological aspect and the emphasis is on the role of language and action in the process of conceptual change.

Earlier we saw that BG was developed as a reaction to the abstract foundations on which the history of ideas, as practiced by Dilthey and Meinecke, was premised. It was also noted that BG seeks to historicize concepts and trace their use and change within texts in order to arrive at a more precise history. However, as a method, BG presents itself as a distinct body of knowledge providing historical data which, Koselleck contends, can only be arrived at by rigorously following its procedures. In the next chapter we will see that BG was initially designed to analyze conceptual transformation in Germany between 1750-1850, when, according to Koselleck, rapid changes in language took place. Here it is important to underline that BG extends itself universally. Any age which exhibits rapid changes in social action as well as the conceptual level can be analyzed by invoking the method of BG, because, Koselleck argues:

A characteristic of historical time is its constant reproduction of the tension between society and its transformation on the one hand, and its linguistic adaptation and processing on the other. All history feeds on this tension. Social relationships, conflicts and their solutions, and the changing preconditions for them are never congruent with the linguistic articulation on the basis of which societies act, understand, interpret, change and re-form themselves.\footnote{R. Koselleck, “Social History and Begriffsgechichte” in I. Hampsher (ed. et al.) History of Concepts: Comparative Perspectives, p. 25.}

“Historical time,” then, is defined in general terms to allow for BG to be applied universally. As we shall see in the next chapter, Koselleck is especially interested in the
gap that opens up between language and action as a catalyst of history, as well as in the consequences of this gulf for both language and action. Concepts, as we shall see, assume a central role in this process.

**The Cambridge School**

In England, too, as in Germany, dissatisfaction with the a-historical and a-linguistic approach to the history of political thought in the post World War II era brought about an alternative approach, less philosophical and more attuned to linguistic and historical realities. Based in Cambridge University, scholars such as R. G. Collingwood, J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, working in various disciplines – history, philosophy and political science – launched a reformatory campaign in the study of the history of political thought. In its course, they simultaneously broke down the walls between these fields of study (by historicizing political philosophy) and articulated the division of labor between them (by differentiating the work of the historian from that of the philosopher).

Prior to this “revolution,” there were two prevailing approaches (or “orthodoxies,” as Skinner refers to them) in the study of political thought: the “text” and the “context.” Broadly speaking, textualists, Leo Strauss prominent among them, emphasized textual exegesis independent from socio-historical context, as well as from the historian’s own concerns. Behind this approach lies the assumption that the canon of political philosophy – the “Great Books” tradition – conveys perennial questions and timeless values. Strauss believed that political texts communicate esoteric or hidden messages regarding the intention of the philosopher in writing his text, though these messages could only be
discerned by the select "trustworthy." By "intention" Strauss does not mean the immediate mundane interest that a political philosopher might have been referring to, but the philosopher's desire to reach a greater, natural truth as was understood by him. Contextualists, on the other hand, believe that religious, political, and economic factors determine the meaning of texts. Contextualists were rejected by Cambridge scholars since they failed to see that explaining why an author has written a text does not explain the text; in other words, Cambridge scholars argue that while it is true that the context can illuminate the reasons why a text was written, it cannot show what was the point of writing it, what the was author trying to do or achieve through his words. This, Skinner and Pocock found unacceptable.

Skinner and Pocock, the two scholars most identified with the English "historic turn," both deeply influenced by Wittgenstein and Austin, rejected these assumptions. They advanced the thesis that prevailing methods in the study of political thought lacked an appropriate historical consideration, and consequentially presented as historical what is actually philosophical:

Alone among the major branches of historical study in the middle twentieth century, the history of political thought was treated as the study of a traditional canon, and the conversion of tradition into history was in this case conducted by the methods of philosophic commentary in the intellectual contents of the tradition, arbitrarily defined as philosophy.

Skinner's path-breaking article "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" opened up a new scholarly era with the assertion that the two leading orthodoxies in the

59 This type of intention must not be confused with Skinner's intentionality theory, discussed below.
60 F.R. Dallmayr, Language and Politics, pp. 79-81.
study of political thought – the text and the context – are based on theoretical errors and thus commit philosophical mistakes in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances. It follows that the result of accepting either orthodoxy has been to fill up the current literature in the history of ideas with a series of conceptual muddle and mistaken empirical claims.\(^\text{64}\)

Furthermore, J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner argued that there are neither “perennial questions” nor a set of “basic concepts” that the student of political thought ought to align himself by. Rather, they maintained, knowledge of the historic, social, and primarily linguistic context is a necessary condition for the proper study of political thought.\(^\text{65}\) A “proper study,” Skinner stated, seeks to excavate the authorial intention behind the text: “the understanding of texts...presupposes the grasp both of what they were intended to mean, and how this meaning was intended to be taken.”\(^\text{66}\)

The demand for greater historical precision and the search for “real” history in language as arguments against a philosophical quest for “perennial questions” in the field of political thought is worth reflecting on since it reveals the scope of Skinner and Pocock’s project. Should the study of political thought be conducted solely within a historical framework? The project inaugurated by these two scholars was motivated by linguistic and historical concerns, and thus called for separating the methodological and conceptual arsenal of the historian from that of the philosopher. Much of the attack on the “old” generation is focused on the methodological confusion with which their work is rife, according to Skinner and Pocock. Philosophy, Pocock explains, is a different mode of reflection than history:


\(^{65}\) Ibid, p. 30.

\(^{66}\) Ibid, p. 63.
The non-historical practitioner is not concerned with what the author of a statement made in a remote past meant by it so much as with what he in his present can make it mean: what he can do with it for purposes of his own, which may or may not — and therefore do not have to — coincide with those of the author.67

The historian, on the other hand, is “interested in the question of how far the author’s use of his words coincide with his modern interpreter’s use of them.”68

Yet one can argue that the advantage of philosophical reflection lies precisely in its freedom to detach itself from time and place and be conducted in the realm of abstract or absolute categories that are rarely an integral part of our everyday, hence historical, experience. By philosophy, Hobbes writes, “is understood the knowledge acquired by reasoning.”69 Historians take quite the opposite view. They do not, as Marc Bloch puts it, think of humans in abstract, rather, they “breathe freely the air of the climate of time.”70

One does not need to decide which approach is better in order to appreciate that history and philosophy are two distinct disciplines. Nor do Skinner and Pocock deny this categorical difference: on the contrary, they cite this difference as evidence that anything that does not comply with their “proper” way of studying history, in unworthy of the title “the history of political thought.” Nevertheless, Skinner and Pocock’s project cannot be accepted in place of other approaches in the study of political thought but rather as a contribution to it. John Dunn, a Cambridge School scholar, makes this point when he insists that the history of political vocabulary and concepts — “the new history,” as he refers to it — as practiced by Skinner and Koselleck is indeed a valuable contribution to the history of political theory, but does not supplant it:

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68 Ibid. Emphasis in original.
In relation to this new (and as yet almost wholly unwritten) history, the history of political theory will be at least as much a grateful consumer as it will a proud contributor. What is certain, however is...[that] it could not, under any circumstances serve as an effective alternative to, or replacement for, the distinctive forms of understanding provided by the history of political theory.\(^{71}\)

Joseph V. Femia is more explicit, arguing that Skinner’s historicism has gone too far in denying the recurrence of “perennial problems.” Some issues, he says, are timeless and do tend to recur over time and place, for example questions such as who should rule, why and how. Indeed, if this were not so, Femia contends, the past would be of no interest to us.\(^{72}\)

Finally, a word of comparison. In both the English and German instances the study of concepts combines a consideration of multiple disciplines: history, linguistics, politics and society. They are interwoven in an effort to understand how concepts are first formed and then transmitted within societies and between them. These two schools of thought, although essentially different, pursue similar objectives and thus are amenable to comparison.\(^{73}\) In a rare acknowledgment of an intellectual affinity, T. Ball, J. Farr and R. Hanson, affiliated with the Cambridge School, write: “What we share with them...is the common conviction that speaking a language involves taking on a world, and altering the concepts constitutive of that language involves nothing less than remaking the world.”\(^{74}\)

Melvin Richter, whose research of the German BG present us with the few existing English texts on the topic, describes the Cambridge School as BG’s “nearest Anglophone analogue;”\(^{75}\) “they share,” he writes, “a common concern with political language treated historically, and the insistence...that political thought and behavior, now and in the past,


\(^{73}\) Unfortunately, the practitioners of these schools have shown very little interest in each other’s work.

\(^{74}\) T. Ball (ed. et al.) *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, p. ix.

\(^{75}\) M. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Science*, p. 3.
cannot be understood without reference to the distinctive vocabularies used by agents in
given contexts."\textsuperscript{76}

One way of acknowledging the disparity between these schools is through the
different metaphors they invoke to describe their divergent approaches. BG historians
tend to view history from above, often making use of the world of typography and
mapping to describe the work of the historian who "attempts to map the minefield, as it
were, by examining the various historical turning-points or watersheds in the history of
concepts..."\textsuperscript{77} Cambridge School scholars, in contrast, tend to observe history from
below, using Foucault's archeological metaphor to characterize the work of the historian
of concepts; as Skinner writes: "one corresponding role for the intellectual historian is
that of acting as a kind of archeologist, bringing buried intellectual treasure back to the
surface, dusting it down and enabling us to reconsider what we think of it."\textsuperscript{78} These
metaphors do not of course cover the whole range of difference between these
approaches, but as we move on to examine more closely Koselleck and Skinner's work,
they may prove helpful in adding a visual point of view to the cognitive dimension.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{77} T. Ball, \textit{Transforming Political Discourse}, p. 9.
Chapter 2
Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner: Language, Action and Two Models of Conceptual Change

In the previous chapter it was argued that change occurs in the *polis* and that, since language and action constitute the *polis* it follows that it is useful to examine their relationship and the influence they exert on the political sphere. Concepts were identified as one possible unit through which this change can be examined. If we can determine how, when and why concepts change their meaning then we may be able to achieve a greater understanding of how, when, and why our political and social lives change. In this chapter we will examine two competing models that attempt to answer these questions, the first adduced by the BG conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck the second by the Cambridge School historian of political thought Quentin Skinner.

Koselleck and Skinner share an intellectual interest. Both are first and foremost historians of "modernity," and, accordingly, their thoughts about the causes of conceptual change spring primarily from their interpretation of the transition to modernity. Both scholars devote as much attention to methodological and philosophical problems in the study of history, as to its practice. Above all, they agree that the appropriate subject matter of history is the study of concepts. Indeed, there would seem to be more similarities between these two scholars than they would probably care to admit. Yet the apparent resemblance is overshadowed by two compelling differences: the source of conceptual change, and the relationship between language and action in this process. It is these crucial differences that constitute the focus of this chapter.
Reinhart Koselleck: Crisis and Conceptual Change

Conceptual change, Koselleck argues, results from a crisis; yet the crisis is a result of this conceptual change. Koselleck attempts to break this apparent "chicken-egg" circle by making a distinction between language and action. This division allows him to examine changes in language independently from changes in action, and further determine the extent to which these transformations are convergent. We will come back to this analytical differentiation a little later, after considering Koselleck's theory of conceptual change. As we shall see, it is the nature of the crisis that leads Koselleck to distinguish these two entities. First, we must examine why, according to Koselleck, modern society is conditioned by a perpetual state of crisis that was caused by conceptual change and how, at the same time, this conceptual change helped bring the crisis about. In this process concepts form an independent category, bridging action and language.

For the English reader the discussion of crisis as a model for conceptual change is explored and defended most notably in Koselleck's Critique and Crisis. First published in 1959, the book begins by discussing contemporaneous issues. Two central problems are of interest to Koselleck: first, the search for the historical preconditions of German National Socialism whose "loss of reality and Utopian exaltation had resulted in hitherto unprecedented crimes." Second, reflecting on the Cold War, Koselleck asserts that the "present tension between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, is a result of European history." Furthermore, this conflict reiterates the permanent state of crisis in

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which the world has been adrift since the mid-seventeenth century. At that time, a gap between language and action started to open up, and as these two units grew further and further apart, the discord between the action that was taking place and the language that was used to talk about it fomented a crisis – the French Revolution. The language of the Enlightenment and the desolate present created by the Absolute State, the language of morality and the actions of politics, the tension between concepts and the world, Koselleck argues, brought about the incipient crisis, which has been present in our world ever since.

Koselleck identifies the genesis of the first crisis – the “prototype” – in Germany during the transition from the Absolute State to the age of Enlightenment, between 1750 and 1850, a period that was crucial both for its political and social thought, as well as for the rapid structural changes in government, the economy, and in society. To underline the radicalism of these processes, Koselleck coined the German word *Sattelzeit*, – meaning an extreme break from the past – to characterize this era. During this period, Koselleck avers, a bourgeois class was emerging; a class which saw itself as the precursor of the new world, and was “laying intellectual claim to the whole world and simultaneously denying the old.” The “intellectual claim,” namely the philosophy of Enlightenment and its language of progress encompassed humankind as a whole, which now purportedly could anticipate a better future that would culminate in a utopian society. This language of progress and utopianism underlines for Koselleck a fact that will become crucial when

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5 Koselleck was criticized for insisting on such a fixed time framework. Melvin Richter attempts to fend off this criticism, arguing that is should be regarded as a heuristic device; the time framework “is meant to make it possible to classify concepts in terms of whether their meanings remained sufficiently consistent to be understood by readers today, whether their meanings altered so as to require present-day reconstruction of their former uses, or whether they are neologism.” The History of Political and Social Concepts, p. 171 fn. 9. Yet while defending the idea that historical periods can be fixed in time, Richter is not offering an explanation which renders this heuristic device more acceptable.

6 R. Koselleck, Critique and Crisis, p. 6.
the crisis erupts. Philosophers of the Enlightenment, he argues, specifically tailored the Enlightenment's language to meet political needs: "the State, as it was, demanded a response, and the response was discovered."\(^7\) In this sense, the language of Enlightenment was a language of critique.\(^8\)

One more crucial characteristic of the Absolute State, epitomized in Hobbes' political theory must be discussed before the crisis unfolds: the absolute division between the public and private spheres as a prerequisite for peace and order.\(^9\) For Hobbes, the *reson d'être* behind the demand for absolute separation, stems directly from the state of nature, where the "war of all against all" reigns. In Hobbes' state of nature "private man is judge of good and evil actions,"\(^10\) and this results in a perpetual clash between men. For the State to be able to maintain peace and order, man must give up his private consciousness in exchange for gaining the one political good for which he enters society: security. Thus, the law of the Absolute State is not "tied to social interests and political decisions and religious hopes; instead, it designates a formal domain of political decisions beyond any Church, estate, or party."\(^11\) According to Koselleck, the division between the private and the public, on which the Absolute State was founded, coupled with the propagation of the language of progress, became the two obstacles which led the Enlightenment to its destruction – to the crisis.

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\(^7\) Ibid, p. 7.

\(^8\) It is important to stress the fact that Koselleck is referring to later developments in the Enlightenment. At first, the Enlightenment accepted the Absolute State and propagated a theory of Enlightened Despotism. Only later, around 1750, did it redirect itself as a critique of the Absolute State. Note, however, that Koselleck specifically refers to the time since 1750, and not before.


The public/private and political/moral dichotomies, Koselleck maintains, prevented Enlightenment philosophers, who espoused a progressive analysis of history, from seeing that their critique was in itself political, and as such not attuned to the concrete political challenges of the day. In other words, the gap between the Enlightenment’s philosophy of history and the unchanged status of the Absolute State created the dissonance which finally culminated in a crisis - the crisis according to Koselleck, “an ideal-type framework which time and again made its reappearance in the subsequent history of the modern world”\textsuperscript{12} namely, the French Revolution.

“Enlightenment,” as Koselleck puts it, “succeeded to a Utopian image which, while deceptively propelling it, helped to produce contradictions which could not be resolved in practice and prepared the way for the Terror and for dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{13} However challenging, this casual representation cannot be discussed here. Rather, it is important to emphasize that Koselleck’s model of conceptual change derives from a perceived gap between language and action. The aspiration to solve a political problem by means of changing language (the Enlightenment’s critique of the Absolute State) resulted in a growing gap between signifier and signified, between language and the world, which eventually produced a break. The change in language alone without an equivalent change in reality generated the crisis.

As was suggested above, Koselleck’s model makes universal claims. “Modernity” is at once a specific historical period and any “new time.” From this follows the assumption that “the more a particular time is experienced as a new temporality, as

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
‘modernity,’ the more demands on the future increase,”¹⁴ and as we have seen, the more these demands increase without a substantial change in action – in the world – the greater the inevitability of crisis. A second universal claim is more closely confined to “our” modernity, but can be extended to any “new time.” According to Koselleck, by identifying those traits that constitute what is specifically modern – the “genetics of modernity”¹⁵ – we can begin to explain peculiar occurrences. As we have seen, Koselleck links his present – the atrocities of the World Wars and the potential for mass destruction of the Cold War – to patterns first established in the eighteenth century. Thus, a study that begins as research into the origins of “our” modernity becomes the temporal exemplification of a repeated pattern and a study of the tension between long-term and short-term social structures. Illuminating the relationship between long-term and short-term processes – the “autonomous sphere” – stands at the heart of BG, it is its purpose:

To understand how modern political and social concepts came into existence, we need to know more about the diverse ways in which the vast transformation of political, social, and economic structures during the Sattelzeit were conceptualized by those experiencing them...we can also learn much about structural change from the concepts that both registered experience and helped shape it through organized decision and action.¹⁶

We shall return to this tension later. First, it is necessary to understand what Koselleck means by “concept” and why studying the history of concepts is a worthwhile endeavor.

**Concepts: Language and Action Differentiated**

Concepts, Koselleck argues throughout his work, are indispensable for studying synchronic and diachronic change. From a synchronic point of view, concepts are a

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heuristic device; from the diachronic perspective, the study of concepts becomes an end unto itself, forming a distinct body of knowledge. Koselleck, unlike Skinner, in fact adduces a definition of the term "concept," though in many ways it is less than satisfactory. It is clear, Koselleck maintains, that sociopolitical terminology embodies expressions that, when subject to critical exegesis, are immediately shown to be concepts. Therefore, Koselleck defines a "concept" in opposition to a "word:"

A word can become unambiguous in use. A concept, by contrast, must remain polysemic in order to remain a concept. True, the concept too attaches to a word, but at the same time it is more than a word: a word becomes a concept once the plentitude of political-social context of meaning and experience, in which a word is used, enters into that one word...a word contains possibilities of meaning, a concept, by contrast, unites in itself a plentitude of meaning. Therefore a concept may be clear, but it must remain polysemous.17

Put differently, Koselleck asserts that words have definite meanings, while concepts are always interpreted.18 But, is it a viable proposition that words have a "definite meaning"? Koselleck does not deny that words, like concepts, can become ambiguous. His claim is more modest; adhering to Wittgensteinian philosophy Koselleck suggests that "a word can become unambiguous in use," whereas a concept "must remain ambiguous in order to be a concept."19 A concept, contrary to a word, can never become unambiguous in use.

However, scholars tend to reject this definition as a tenable premise for the study of conceptual history. According to Bodeker, identifying a concept through its multiple meanings is at once to acknowledge that concepts can only be understood within a broader net of meaning and are always in need of contextualization. BG historians, he argues, fail to recognize that it is not concepts that are the subject matter of their project,

19 R. Koselleck, Futures Past, p. 84.
but rather a much larger structure of conceptuality within which concepts become meaningful. From a different perspective Bernard Scholz argues that by a “concept,” Koselleck actually means “mental correlates of expressions” which “serve in the construction and maintenance [of] the social reality” and thus appear in multiple strands of conversation: tracts, treatises, diaries, newspapers, governmental decrees and proclamations, to name a few. But, Shcolz maintains, Koselleck’s definition does not recognize this multiplicity and consequently fails to offer a proper guide for the historian of concepts; which of these “strands” should he study? Boer carries this critique further, arguing that Koselleck often speaks of concepts as if they were living bodies, referring to them as entities that have “life spans,” “vital properties” and a “temporal internal structure,” thus giving the false impression that words have a life of their own.

Despite the difficulties that arise from Koselleck’s definition, we should not dismiss his broader view about the importance of concepts in writing and understanding history and its relation to the present. Indeed, BG demonstrates the vitality of concepts in writing the history of political thought and action. Two themes in Koselleck’s work are particularly illuminating with regard to the advantages of studying concepts: the analytical difference between language and action, and the difference between social history and BG in the process of decoding social change. These two themes will be our focus in the rest of this section.

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Earlier we saw that Koselleck links the transition to modernity with the upsurge of a crisis. This historical interpretation leads him, in his methodological discussions, to draw a sharp distinction between language and action in the process of conceptual change. Language and action are understood as two discrete units of analysis, each having its own history. Historical occurrences and the language used to speak about them are essentially at variance. However, it must be emphasized, although language and action are analytically differentiated, the mutual dependency between them is fully recognized:  

All language is historically conditioned and all history is linguistically conditioned...But at the same time I do want to insist that language and history be kept separate analytically, because neither one can be related in its entirety to the other. Between language and action...there remains a difference even if language is a speech act, and even if action...[is] mediated by language.  

Thus, without denying this dependency, Koselleck specifies three realms that illustrate the difference between language and action: (1) pre/extra linguistic conditions of history; (2) the relation between history and language from the perspective of events “coming into being;” (3) the relation between language and action in retrospect.  

The pre/extra linguistic conditions of history refer to “natural givens” that humans share with animals. These meta-historical conditions are the circle of life, the polarity of the sexes and the progression of generations (“generativity”). In addition, pre/extra linguistic conditions are represented by the conflicts that arise from what Koselleck calls the “inner/outer” dichotomy. Erecting borders between societies as well as within them generates conflicts that constitute history. Also, Koselleck draws attention to the

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24 Koselleck equates history with reality and being and contends that these stand in opposition to language, thought and consciousness, respectively.

“master/slave” dichotomy on which political communities are based as a meta-historical natural given; that is, one of the conditions that make history happen. The pre/extra linguistic conditions form the basis for the diachronic conflicts, they are the “stuff” without which “no history can come to be.” Again, it must be stressed, by arguing that these formal oppositions (earlier/later, inner/outer, above/below) condition history, Koselleck is not denying that they are grasped linguistically; rather, he is insisting that “these elementary, natural givens remain, however much language may seek to efface them.”

Notwithstanding, these three dichotomies seem qualitatively different. The claim that humans are caught in the circle of life and are divided into two sexes is manifestly not equal to the claim that it is in our nature to demarcate borders and form master/slave communities. The first claim is an indisputable biological fact; the latter two are historically based and thus are not “natural.” Koselleck appears to be invoking his own (somewhat Hobbesian) understanding of human nature here, thus influencing his choice of “natural” elements. Moreover, it can be argued that the ability to speak, to communicate intelligibly, is in itself a pre-linguistic natural given, like the life-death circle and that these two are in fact the only “natural givens” with which we come into the world.

Next, Koselleck exemplifies the discrepancy between language and actions that are “coming into being.” Here he refers to “practical concepts which precede a political

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26 That societies may seek more equal forms of political organizations does not, Koselleck argues, contradict the initial formal given of an “above/below” dichotomy.
In Herodotus' *History*, Koselleck argues, a linguistic constitutional typology consisting of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy was first introduced. By differentiating between these three possible constitutions, Koselleck asserts, Herodotus was not only reacting to a temporal problem, but also formulating structural alternatives of history. In this case concepts represent different possibilities of action, that is, various possible histories, in effect initiating and conditioning action. In other words, only what is already articulated in words, has the potential of becoming history. Koselleck uses Herodotus to draw one more conclusion regarding the relationship between language and history. By tracing conceptual change over time, he maintains, we discover that certain structural patterns persist in language. In his view the public debate in Germany prior to the French Revolution, serves as proof that the constitutional conceptual structure has not changed since it was first formulated by Herodotus, only its temporal circumstantial content.

Thus, from the difference between language and actions that are "coming into being," we learn that "language changes more slowly than does the chain of events that it helps to set in motion and that it seeks to comprehend." Furthermore, we realize that at different points in time, our possibilities are not endless, but are already determined by language.

Finally, language and action are differentiated in retrospect, in the process of writing history. Obviously, writing history involves selecting from what, for all practical reasons, is an unlimited field of action. However, Koselleck asserts, this selection is not

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29 Ibid, p. 653.
31 Koselleck here might be accused of overlooking the work of Montesquieu, who, prior to the French Revolution has offered a new constitutional classification consisting of Republic, Monarchy and Despotism. One possible reason for this might be that Koselleck is examining the German discourse rather than the French one.
merely restricted by language, “all selection is already structured prelinguistically”\(^{33}\) and is conditioned by the same “natural givens” discussed above. First, Koselleck argues, it makes a difference whether the historian is a contemporary of the events or whether he is reporting on them in retrospect. Being a philosopher of history during the Enlightenment gave one’s historical analysis a status of truth, which faded only with the critical distance of the generations to come. Secondly, the historian’s political and social status also determine his point of view and the meaning he reads into historical developments; Machiavelli, Marx and Rousseau immediately come to mind. Thirdly, it is consequential whether the historian is part of the events he discusses or whether he reports on them from outside.\(^{34}\) In all these cases we see that language and action run their own course, although they constantly check each other. There is also an incipient sense of the importance of concepts as links between these two entities. As we shall see shortly, apart from bridging language and action, Koselleck claims that the study of concepts constitutes an independent branch of knowledge.

In his methodological writings, Koselleck often reflects on the difference between practitioners of social history and BG. Jorn Rusen has sketched the development of German historiography since 1945 in three phases, social history being the most recent approach. The first phase (1945-1960) practiced mainly hermeneutic methods, and sought to interpret the intentions and self-understanding of principal agents. The second phase (early 1960’s to mid-1970’s) was revolutionary in character, calling into question the organization and purpose of the historical profession as a whole. In this period, a new generation of scholars experimented with new methods and approaches, such as critical

\(^{33}\) Ibid, p. 662.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid, pp. 661-62.
theory, critical rationalism and Marxist critique. The third phase (end of 1970’s to mid-1980’s) involved a synthesis of the two earlier ones. Practitioners of social history no longer portrayed history as a narrative, but as part of a larger framework of social structures that condition human action. Thus, to some extent, these structures were understood to be outside human intentions and purposes. Koselleck compares and differentiates BG from this type of social history.

The discrepancy between social history and BG resembles the language-action dichotomy that Koselleck argues for, to the extent that these two disciplines feed on each other while remaining parallel, mutually dependent, paths of change. Social history and BG represent two distinct “structures;” the former seeks to uncover long-term patterns of change, the latter is focused on short-term changes. This innate structural difference entails also an apparent difference in sources: “a Begriffsgeschichte concerns itself (primarily) with texts and words, while a social history employs texts merely as a means of deducing circumstances and movements that are not, in themselves, contained within texts.” Notwithstanding, as was the case with the language/action dichotomy, social history and BG are mutually dependent:

Without common concepts there is no society, and above all, no political field of action. Conversely, our concepts are founded in politicosocial systems that are far more complex than would be indicated by treating them simply as linguistic communities organized around specific key concepts.

Above all, Koselleck argues that BG is a necessary component in writing social history, although it is at the same time an independent branch of knowledge. To fail to consider the history of concepts when attempting to write social history, will render it incomplete.

36 R. Koselleck, Futures Past, p. 73.
37 Ibid, p. 74.
In support of this claim, Koselleck identifies a discrepancy between social history and BG in three spheres: method, discipline and theory.

We begin with the methodological disparity. Since a perpetual gap exists between “vanished reality and its linguistic evidence,”38 BG presents itself as a type of “source criticism,” a tool for filling this constant gap. Social history, tracing long-term processes, is not equipped to sort out this discrepancy, and thus is dependent on BG to illuminate concepts by way of verifying their “linguistically stored experience.”39 “Source criticism” is a method of textual exegesis, which enables the social historian to closely study the meanings and politicosocial status of concepts. To fully appreciate an historical social policy, for example, it is not enough for the social historian to situate it within a net of political and social conditions, nor will it suffice, as Skinner recommends, to study the language of other contemporary authors and documents. In order to understand social policies of the past, it is imperative to examine the specific concepts they enshrined, since they illuminate questions that transcend mere comprehension: future intentions, contemporary disputes, continuing elements of the past.40

Koselleck thus presents the method of BG as a tool for writing accurate social history. However, BG is not only a necessary component in writing social history, it is at the same time an autonomous discipline that produces an independent branch of knowledge. A “by product” of source-criticism, Koselleck asserts, is the writing of a concept’s history. In an historical investigation, a concept is taken out of its original text and its meaning is then determined diachronically, in light of its existence in time, and

39 Ibid.
40 R. Koselleck, Futures Past, pp. 75-77.
synchronically, in relation to other contemporary concepts. One immediate advantage of subjecting a concept to diachronic analysis, is the possibility to trace persistence, change, and novelty in its meaning; furthermore, Koselleck argues, it is only after these are identified that a structural transformation can be grasped:

The persistence and validity of a social or political concept and its corresponding structure can only be appreciated diachronically. Words that have remained in constant use are not in themselves a sufficient indication of the stability of their substantial meaning...It is the diachronic disposition of elements which discloses long-term structural changes.

From this disciplinary contribution follows the theoretical difference between social history and BG. Koselleck’s remarks here are vague, and it is the least substantial of the three discrepancies he discusses. The theoretical component of BG, Koselleck maintains, derives from the flexible change in points of view – from synchronic to diachronic – that it makes possible. The theory of BG attempts to the link event and structure, insofar as concepts determine the conditions of what can be considered possible or real history: “It is only concepts which demonstrate persistence, repeatable applicability, and empirical validity – concepts with structural claims – which indicate that once a ‘real’ history can today appear possible and be represented as such.” This controversial claim can only be understood in light of Koselleck’s overall approach. It appears that Koselleck is arguing that only those concepts which have survived the passage of time and are still in use today – even if their content has changed – make possible the reconstruction of the remote past in the present. This claim brings us back to Koselleck’s understanding of the “modern” condition and his contention that long-term structures have accompanied humanity since early on and are manifested in individual

41 Ibid, pp. 79-80.
42 Ibid, p. 81.
43 Ibid, p. 90.
incidents time and again. As a theory, this view is of course contestable, and since it extends beyond the topic of conceptual change _per se_ and involves a broader historical discussion about whether the consistency of concepts validates the hypothesis that history happens once and is then repeated time and again, it cannot be addressed here. Rather, after discussing Koselleck’s approach to the relationship between language and action and his view regarding their role in the process of conceptual change, we turn to examine Skinner’s contribution to question at hand.

**Quentin Skinner: Intentionality Theory and Conceptual Change**

Skinner’s intentionality theory is at the heart of his methodological as well as philosophical discussions. Stated simply, “intentionality theory” holds that recovering an author’s intention in writing is equivalent to recovering the point (or meaning) of his utterance: what the author was attempting to do or achieve in his writing. But what does it mean that agents do things in writing? We have seen that “ordinary language” philosophy assumes that to speak is to participate in a “language game,” to act in the world. In his renowned book *How To Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin grounds his language/action theory on this assumption and discusses a class of sentences which, he argues, are best understood as speech-acts. Since Skinner’s intentionality theory draws heavily on Austin’s, we will first review those aspects of Austin’s speech-act theory that Skinner utilizes.

Speech-act theory, as its name implies, holds that to speak is (sometimes, not always) to act. The action carried in language is not of speaking (i.e. making intelligible

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noise); rather, action is generated by speaking, or as it is usually put in speaking, but is not a consequence of it. If, for example, John utters the sentence “I promise to be on time,” John’s promise is created by his utterance and the particular words he uses. If the word “promise,” or an equivalent, had not been used, a promise would not have been engendered. Making a promise, then, can only be done in language, by speaking. In How To Do Things With Words, Austin is especially interested in a class of speech-acts consisting of cases such as promising, betting, and marrying which he calls “performative sentences,” thus distinguishing them from mere statements.\textsuperscript{45} Language as action is captured by the designation “performative sentence,” Austin explains, because to perform is the “usual verb with the noun ‘action:’ it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”\textsuperscript{46}

Yet speech-acts, in common with all forms of speaking, are never uttered in a vacuum, and this is why “the appropriate circumstances”\textsuperscript{47} in which an utterance is delivered becomes crucial for completing a successful communication act. To be considered an effective act of communication, a speech-act is dependent on two essential components: the context in which it is uttered and the speaker’s intention in delivering it. Consider, for example, the importance of the context in the sentence: “There’s a bear in the forest.” This sentence performs at least three different speech-acts: it may be a description (of the forest); a warning (in the case that one is contemplating a walk in the wood); and advice (if, for example, one has never seen a bear before and asks where he can find one). Evidently, the very same words carry different meanings and purposes, depending on the context in which they were uttered and the intention the speaker wished

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, pp. 1-11.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, p. 12.
to convey. Ascertaining the speaker's intention is important due to the multiplicity of contexts, as presented above. Equally important is the ability to differentiate between an utterance and its context in analytical categories. Since speech-acts combine talking and doing, Austin must make a clear distinction between the speech and the act. Thus, every speech-act is composed of a "locutionary act" and an "illocutionary force." The former refers to the literal meaning of the words uttered ("There's a bear in the forest"); the latter refers to the intention of the utterance (description/warning/advice). The illocutionary force depends on the context in which the utterance was delivered. In order "to determine what illocutionary act is so performed we must determine in what way we are using the locution," i.e. the intention behind it.

This is a crucial point for Skinner, who builds on Austin's speech-act theory and applies it to political texts. To identify the illocutionary force of a text, Skinner argues, is in fact "to know what a writer meant by a particular work...to know what his primary intentions were in writing it...an attack on or a defence of...a criticism of or a contribution to, some particular attitude or line of argument." However, although it is true that political texts consist of utterances, can it be argued that political texts are equivalent to one utterance and are therefore amenable to analysis as such? Furthermore, a method for detecting "performative sentences" is essential before one can determine which sentences are genuinely "performative." Yet, according to Forguson, Austin fails to provide an adequate answer to this problem. In fact, he argues, a satisfactory answer to this question cannot be offered because it is impossible to make explicit that part of an

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48 The use of the word "meaning" is based on Austin's own suggestion that the locutionary act is "roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense." Ibid, p. 108. This is less then a clear definition of the concept "meaning" and is used above to signify the literal immediate meaning of the words uttered.
49 Ibid, p. 98.
utterance which is performative, that is, the exact point of the act carried in it.\textsuperscript{51} This criticism is valid in the case of Skinner's intentionality theory as well. Political texts are highly complex "utterances," consisting of multiple intentions and purposes; is it possible to determine for certain the exact intention behind them? Skinner attempts to bypass this problem by arguing that the illocutionary force of a political text can be recovered if the historian of concepts delineate[s] the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance...and, next, trace[s] the relations between the given utterance and...[its] wider linguistic context as means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.\textsuperscript{52}

Can this be accepted as a solution? Is it plausible to describe and explain the "whole range of communications"? And what does this "range" consist of? Texts of political thought alone, or should it perhaps include newspapers, literature and art as well? In other words, Skinner's attempt to solve Ferguson's problem is unsatisfactory.

So far we have seen that to identify what an author was doing in speaking, the illocutionary force of his utterance, is equivalent to knowing what he meant to do – what action he was pursuing – when communicating and highlighted some problems that rise from this approach. Yet the notion that an author can do something in speaking assumes another party in the equation. If there is a point in doing something, it has not yet been specified what might be on the receiving end of this deed. This is the juncture where language and social action are joined, for it is the social sphere (consisting of social conventions, norms, values), to which things are done, according to Skinner. For this reason, intentionality theory presents us with a set of explicit assumptions regarding the

relationship between language and action, as well as its possible implications. The interplay between language-action (speech-acts) and the social sphere generates conceptual change. This outcome is brought about by a series of intended confrontations that political theorists have had with prevailing social conventions in their societies. Social conventions were countered or confirmed by them in language; in this process, the meanings of shared concepts (and social conceptions) were altered. Because he believes that "texts are acts," Skinner assumes that political texts embody the deeds that their authors espoused vis-à-vis social conventions and prevailing norms. By recovering their illocutionary force, their intention, Skinner asserts,

we begin to see not merely what arguments they were presenting, but also what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or perhaps even polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate. We are able to know what they meant to do – how they intended to influence and manipulate the social sphere. This is the sense in which recovering intention equals the recovering of meaning. According to Skinner, this type of linguistic performance sets the wheels of conceptual change in motion.

If speech-acts are, as Skinner maintains, a form of "social behavior" that make up "a class of (linguistic) action" and we can, as he argues, derive their intended point – their illocutionary force – by situating them in the right context, it follows that we can also know what political theorists such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke really meant and thus separate the historical from the unhistorical:

The key to excluding unhistorical meanings must lie in limiting our range of descriptions of any given text to those which the author himself might in principle have avowed, and...the key to understanding the actual historical meaning of a text must lie in recovering the complex intentions of the author in writing.\textsuperscript{56}

Only then can “real” history be written. The appeal to intentionality, it must be stated clearly, is first and foremost, a guideline for writing a history of political thought. At the same time, there are unavoidable implications for the relationship between language and action, since intentionality assumes that individuals, namely political theorists, have single-handedly generated change in action through their calculated and manipulative use of language, which, in turn, generated a change in language itself. Building on Austin’s speech-act theory, Skinner assumes that an agent can – and in fact does – actively and purposely alter social reality through his use of language. That is, effectively maneuvering language produces a change in social conventions and the meaning of concepts. This is the reason why intentions are of such interest. Skinner’s scrupulous methodology is aimed at excavating authors’ intentions \textit{in} speaking, showing how they used and manipulated the language they “lived in,” thereby influencing the political agenda both positively and negatively. For this reason, Skinner argues, conceptual language should be the focal point of historians of political thought. But what does Skinner mean by “concept”?

\textit{Concepts: Language Is (Sometimes) a Form of Action}

We are accustomed to think of concepts as being a certain type of word. Likewise, most people will readily accept the fact that words change their meaning. Can it be inferred from these two statements that concepts change when the meaning of words change?

changes? According to Skinner, the answer is definitely not. Although agreeing that the fact that words change their meaning tells us something about "the process of political innovation,"57 Skinner maintains that the process of change cannot be reduced to a simple formula according to which a change in a meaning of a word generates a corresponding change in a concept. This is because words are not concepts, and concepts are more than words: "If we wish to grasp how someone sees the world – what distinctions he draws, what classifications he accepts – what we need to know is not what words he uses but rather what concepts he possesses."58 We see, then, that Skinner, like Koselleck, draws a distinction between a "word" and a "concept." A word is not a concept and a concept is not the accumulative meaning of words, and "to argue for such equivalence is undoubtedly a mistake."59 To account for this difference Skinner adds a third component – a "term" – to his analysis of conceptual change. Adding the intermediate category "term" allows Skinner to create a linguistic hierarchy of "concepts," "terms" and "words." Conceptual change occurs as these three units are negotiated through the use of speech-acts.

The intermediate category "term" amounts to the evaluative-descriptive60 vocabulary we use when assessing things in the world. It is crucial to understanding Skinner's theory of conceptual change. A "term" is a word that "gains its meaning from the place it occupies within an entire conceptual scheme."61 It is our guide when

59 Ibid.
60 There are cases in which to describe is at the same time to evaluate. Skinner's intentionality theory is based on this assumption, which is further explained and discussed below.
attempting to decode the prevailing ideological language in which an author was living. “Terms” are value-laden and when attached to an action, they reveal to us whether the action is conceived positively or negatively by the users of the language. However, it is important to note that although in most cases “terms” assist us in identifying concepts, this is not always the case. Skinner puts forward two claims regarding the demarcation between “concepts” and “terms” that exemplify why they are sometimes mutually exclusive. In the first case, he says, “it cannot be a necessary condition of my possessing a concept that I need to understand the correct application of a corresponding term.”

For example, at the beginning of Paradise Lost, when Milton “emphasized...his decision to deal with ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,’” he could not have used the word “original” since it had not yet entered the language at that time. Nonetheless, Skinner notes, the “concept is clearly central to his thought.” The second claim is the reverse of the first: to possess a concept cannot be merely to understand the correct application of a corresponding term. There are certain highly general terms, such as being and infinity, which language users may be capable of applying with perfect consistency, yet “it might be possible to show that there is simply no concept which answers to any of their agreed usages.” Thus Skinner concludes, “the possession of a concept will at least standardly be signaled by the employment of a corresponding term. As long as we bear in mind that

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62 Skinner does not explicitly define what he means by “ideology.” James Tully notes that Skinner refers to the word “ideology” in a broad and general way, to designate “a language of politics defined by its conventions and employed by a number of writers.” “The Pen is a Mighty Sward: Quentin Skinner’s Analysis of Politics,” in J. Tully (ed.) Meaning and Context, p. 9.


64 Ibid.

65 Ibid, pp. 7-8.

66 Ibid, p. 8. This example is very surprising since Skinner is identified with the Wittgensteinian approach according to which to know what a words means we must look at the way it is used. Yet here Skinner suggests that meaning can, in some cases, transcend use.
"standardly" means neither necessarily nor sufficiently." The linguistic hierarchy that Skinner builds is made of "words," some of which are "terms," that make up "concepts," which, in turn, are part of the ideological language.

What then are concepts? Nowhere in his writings does Skinner explicitly define what a concept is, but we are now in a position to see how he uses this word (that is, what it means). Earlier it was noted that for Skinner "concepts" are not "words;" now it becomes clear that Skinner uses the word "concept" in a very broad sense to designate a world-view, a social convention, a norm. In this understanding of the word, a concept is an agreement that a community of speakers share, a social scheme. This is the reason why, according to Skinner, we ought to study conceptual change: to trace conceptual change is to follow the course of shifts in social conventions. That is, to discover how societies transform. Concepts, here, are not merely "ideas" they are the key to unlocking society's self-image.

We will consider one of the numerous examples of Skinner's use of the word "concept" as a designation of a world-view. In his The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Skinner states that one of his goals is to show that between the late thirteenth century and the end of the sixteenth century, "the main elements of a recognisably modern concept of the State were gradually acquired."

In this period there was a shift from the idea of the ruler "maintaining his state" to the idea that the state is a separate legal and constitutional order that the ruler has a duty to maintain. This historical development led to the view that the power of the state, not the ruler, was the basis for government, which, in turn "enabled the state to be conceptualized in distinctively

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67 Ibid.
modern terms – as the sole source of law and legitimate force within its own territory, and as the sole appropriate object of its citizens' allegiances.\textsuperscript{69} At the end of the sixteenth century, then, a new conceptual era is said to begin. The concept "state" is now associated with the modern conceptualization of the social order, and we see how a social convention was historically formed.

Until now we have seen that Skinner, following Austin, treats language as a form of action. Though Skinner offers little critical reflection on this topic, in his use of the concept "action" he is in fact alluding to two separate spheres in which language and action are components of change: the social and the conceptual. The first use of action follows Austin’s speech-act theory: \textit{in} airing an utterance an agent is thought of as \textit{doing} something. This level of interplay between language and action takes place within linguistic confines. Although a speech-act has pre-linguistic origins (motives) and post-linguistic implications, it is nonetheless a linguistic action. The second use of action is implicit and is closer to the definition of action as non-linguistic behavior: a "project" as Skinner refers to it. Action as language and action as non-linguistic behavior are mutually dependent, and so the problem facing an agent who wishes to legitimate what he is doing at the same time as gaining what he wants cannot simply be the instrumental problem of tailoring his normative language in order to fit his projects. It must in part be the problem of tailoring his projects in order to fit the available normative language.\textsuperscript{70}

Although Skinner does not want to claim that linguistic action is the only type of action that exists in the social sphere – hence the reference to the relationship between an agent’s projects and the normative language at his disposal – his choice of subject matter and method, namely, historicizing political language, results in a distortion of the

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. x.
\textsuperscript{70} Q. Skinner, \textit{The Foundations of Modern Political Thought}, Vol. 1, pp. xii-xiii.
attributes of the social sphere. Skinner does not discuss those non-linguistic acts that are manifestly part of the social sphere, with the result that language is presented as the sole generator of change. We will come back to this point again later, after considering two still outstanding questions about the relationship between language and action in Skinner's intentionality theory: What is it specifically that an agent does in language? And how does an agent actually do things in language, that is, how do concepts change? Skinner specifies three actions that agents do in language: describing, evaluating and legitimizing "untoward actions."\(^{71}\)

To describe is sometimes to evaluate. Skinner here argues for a specific class of speech-acts that consist of "evaluative-descriptive terms."\(^{72}\) An example of this type of speech-acts will, in this case, also serve to explain it. If, for instance, we describe an action as courageous or honest, we are thereby commending it; if, on the other hand, we describe an action as treacherous or disloyal we are at the same time condemning it.\(^{73}\) Commending and condemning in these cases are the illocutionary forces behind the descriptions. According to Skinner, studying the evaluative-descriptive class of speech-acts may result in three main types of insights: "insights into changing social beliefs and theories; into changing social perceptions and awareness; and into changing social values and attitudes."\(^{74}\) After examining these three processes, we will be able to see how it is possible, by manipulating this class of speech acts, to legitimize untoward actions, and how, consequentially, concepts change.


\(^{72}\) Ibid, p. 293.

\(^{73}\) Ibid, p. 294.

In order to use an evaluative-descriptive speech-act, there are three things we need to know: first, the criteria for applying it; second, whether the required criteria are present in the specific circumstances; third, the range of speech-acts the word can be used to perform. \textsuperscript{75} When we disagree about the application of one of these criteria in language, we are, Skinner argues, \textit{ipso facto} disagreeing about the social order and allowing for change to occur. To illustrate the first type of knowledge, Skinner cites Duchamp’s use of “certain familiar objects (coat-pegs, lavatory bowls) as works of art.” \textsuperscript{76} The debate over whether these objects should be treated as works of art generated a disagreement at the linguistic level that centered on the question of whether there should or should not be a criterion (e.g. the exercise of skill) for the correct application of the evaluative-descriptive speech-act “work of art.” Yet, Skinner argues, this disagreement transcends the linguistic sphere. The concept “work of art” has traditionally been associated with “an ideal of workmanship, has been opposed to the ‘merely useful,’ has been employed as an antonym for \textit{nature} and so on.”\textsuperscript{77} Thus, according to Skinner, to change the criteria for applying the descriptive-evaluative speech-act “work of art” means changing a whole set of conceptual links and associations, in effect, transforming social conventions. But is this really a case of conceptual change? It depends on how one interprets change. Skinner might be overstating the process described above as a case of change \textit{par excellence}. This process is perhaps better described as a case of conceptual expansion, for it cannot be said that what traditionally used to be associated with “a work of art” is now dismissed as such. Rather, we have expanded our definition of the concept “art,” not altogether changed it.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, p. 13.
The second type of knowledge is concerned with the presence of the appropriate circumstances for the standard use of a descriptive-evaluative speech-act. When, for example, someone says: “Wives in ordinary middle-class families are... suffering exploitation,” the use of the strong evaluatives “suffering” and “exploitation” reflects a social attitude. Skinner is right to assert that in this case the use of the terms “suffering” and “exploitive” in these circumstances is indeed a non-standard application of it in relation to prevailing norms ("Wives," that is, are not normally described in these words); but will this non-standard use generate a change in the fate of those wives? Perhaps; a change in the social world is a possible outcome, not a necessary one. The limits of this type of change will become most apparent in the discussion of the PC movement where we will ask whether a change in social action can be considered complete when it remains solely at the linguistic level.

There is yet a third type of knowledge to be examined regarding the application of evaluative speech-acts, which involves a dispute about the "nature and range" of their application. In this category, an agent may use or refrain from using a certain evaluative speech-act in order to state a social position. He can weaken or even abolish the force of a speech-act by simply not using it (this, Skinner suggests, is the fate of the word *gentleman*); he can make it clear from the context that he is using an evaluative merely as a description, not an evaluation (as is the case with the word *black* to describe a person). In other cases he may change the direction of the evaluative speech-act through the context (for example, the concept “liberal” can be used both as an appraisal and as a

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79 Ibid, p. 17.
80 It is interesting to note that the American PC movement eliminates the distinction between evaluating and describing: according to this approach, to describe is necessarily to evaluate.
context (for example, the concept "liberal" can be used both as an appraisal and as a condemnation). 81

These three types of knowledge help us assess the interplay between language and social action. We come now to the fourth action that an agent might do in language: legitimizing untoward action by manipulating evaluative-descriptive terms. This is in fact the most important act in the process of conceptual change, since "it is essentially by manipulating this set of terms that any society succeeds in establishing and altering its moral identity." 82 Skinner presents two ways in which agents can legitimize untoward actions and thus stimulate conceptual change. First, an agent can manipulate an existing set of evaluative-descriptive terms. An agent can describe illegitimate actions using a standard disapproving set of terms, though at the same time make it clear from the context that they are being used in an approving or neutral way. The same goal can be achieved by introducing new and approving evaluative terms as descriptions of the actions the agent is seeking to legitimize or by turning neutral terms into terms of approbation and using them to describe the untoward action. Second, an agent can vary the range of disapproving descriptive terms either by neutralizing an existing set of such terms or by reversing their meaning, to express approval. 83

Change – conceptual and actual – is prompt as a result of these linguistic maneuvers. In other words, the fact that we can do things in language explains not only how the meaning of concepts changes over time but also how change is produced in our social non-linguistic world. Language in Skinner’s analysis is thus seen as the primary

81 Ibid, pp. 18-19.
source of change insofar as linguistic and non-linguistic actions are explained in reference to available normative language:

In recovering the terms of the normative vocabulary available to any given agent for the description of his political behaviour, we are at the same time indicating one of the constraints upon his behaviour itself. This suggests that, in order to explain why...an agent acts as he does, we are bound to make some reference to this vocabulary, since it evidently figures as one of the determinations of his action.\(^{84}\)

What some of the other determinations in an agent’s actions outside language might be, Skinner does not specify, thus risking the reduction of all social and conceptual change to language. If we take this thought one step further, we find that we are facing language which is action and action which is a reflection of this language and thus in no substantial way different from this language. Social and political goals are achieved, according to this representation, almost exclusively \textit{in} language. We see that for Skinner, language and action are treated as the same type of phenomenon. And it is the assumption that language is a form of action and that action is a linguistic deed that serves as the premise for the American PC movement, as the next chapter reveals.

\(^{84}\) Q. Skinner, \textit{The Foundation of Modern Political Thought}, vol. 1, p. xiii.
Chapter 3  
Politically Correct:  
A Theory and Practice of Conceptual Change

PC: Changing Concepts and Conceptual Change

At the heart of the "politically correct" (PC) movement lies the assumption that everything – truth, facts, values, standards – is a product of language. The content of these concepts, it is claimed, is established through rhetoric and persuasion in a world where "reality" is "a human invention...a linguistic habit." As such, PC offers us a third model for observing the language/action relationship in the process of conceptual change. In the previous chapter we saw that for Koselleck, conceptual change springs from the opening of a gap between language and action that finally culminates in a crisis. We also saw that Skinner uses speech-acts as signposts along the path of conceptual change. The PC theory is based on a third language-action model, in which social action is a fabrication of language. Language, this approach maintains, makes action "social;" only through language can one know what is considered an action in the social sphere. Because everything is mediated through language, it becomes almost the sole locus of attention and the primary vehicle for achieving change. Accordingly, it is assumed that social problems ensue from adhering to a conceptual scheme that robs language of its real interpretive force, thus creating an illusion that something exists beyond language – a truth, a *sui generis* reality, a natural world. The implications of this position are far-reaching, “far beyond the realm of aesthetics and philosophy to the very texture of everyday life.” An immediate consequence is that to generate change in action – that is,

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in society – it is necessary to change language; if the world that appears to us is a function of language, then “we cannot alter the one without altering the other.”

PC is not usually approached from this perspective. In its popular use, PC is associated with the “challenged” euphemisms (vertically challenged, optically challenged) or else it is used to indicate awareness of the fact that an utterance is considered “offensive:” “I know it is politically incorrect to say that…but…” In academic circles, PC is often associated with the so-called “culture war” on American campuses: affirmative action policies, the opening of new departments (e.g. women studies, gay studies), speech codes and the battle over the Western canon. Undoubtedly, these are all aspects of the PC movement, but are better understood as its manifestations than as its source. Similar confusion exists over the place of language in the PC debate. This chapter attempts to disentangle cause from effect in the linguistic sphere of PC in order to examine its proposed agenda for conceptual change. A discussion of PC’s roots and sources provides insight into the relationship between language and action in a process of conceptual change which has been underway in American society since the 1960’s but goes unnoticed when PC is discussed as a “culture war.” Indeed, this process is worth reflecting on, since it gives rise to new assumptions about the role of language in society, while also providing an opportunity to examine a movement that is dedicated to the promotion of conceptual change. This, it is argued here, is in fact the legacy – the theory and practice – of PC.

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3 Ibid, p. 23.
4 Why there is such a wide gap between the popular meaning of PC and its academic reference, and what this says about the communication between academic and popular circles begs an answer, yet these questions are outside the scope of this essay.
What is the novelty of PC? After all, the view that language is our only foundation for understanding reality is hardly new; as was discussed in the first chapter this approach was developed and defended by linguistic philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Austin. However, an obvious but important point must not be overlooked: Wittgenstein and Austin were philosophers and did not attempt, as PC’ers do, to translate their teachings into a social policy. To the extent that PC seeks to implement this theory in practice, it is unique both from the point of view of linguistic philosophy and that of the models advanced by Koselleck and Skinner. Thus, reflecting on the PC phenomenon, we will ask: In what sense does language become the basis of society? How is conceptual change sought? Are PC’ers capable of achieving this conceptual change? Do they offer a new set of concepts, – a new understanding of society, – that can also be practiced?

The desire to generate conceptual change begins with a delegitimization of existing language, the prevailing “language of liberalism” or the “liberal paradigm.” PC aims to undermine liberalism’s status as the only valid structure of thought; targeting “Liberalism with a capital L,”5 PC’ers seek to unmask the liberal paradigm’s biases, which, they argue, is falsely presented as a neutral, value-free theory. To achieve this goal, champions of PC take aim primarily against the central concepts that constitute the liberal paradigm and are said to be falsely devising a sense of meaning and order; concepts such as “objectivity,” “rationality,” “fact,” “truth,” and “reality.” All world-conceptions that emanate from the liberal paradigm are inherently suspicious and are portrayed by PC’ers as no more than “judgments relative to differing and competing

vocabularies or paradigms. The word “relative,” though, should be taken with caution; as we shall see, PC’ers are not suggesting that the Archemedian point has completely lost its validity. Rather, according to PC’ers, the Archemedian point is language; and since there are numerous languages, there are multiple Archemedian points. Every society is a mesh of words and concepts, and although the social web is not easily knitted, it is still possible – indeed it is desired – to tear down the prevailing (liberal) web and recreate it in a way that will better facilitate society.

Instead of the liberal paradigm, PC’ers aspire to establish a new paradigm based on flexible, constantly fluctuating concepts. As we shall see, action and language in this system are continuously checked against each other. In its extremity, the PC project becomes almost incomprehensible. It robs society of stability and finds futile the search for anything that is “greater” than contingent, locally negotiated, linguistic interpretations of “reality.” This position immediately begs serious and important questions: What is a “local” truth? Who partakes in the negotiation process and on what basis? Who decides that a concept is no longer representative of a “local” truth? Their roots and horizon consisting of language alone, PC theorists rarely ponder these basic questions. Yet at the same time, PC’ers are not seeking anarchism or promoting nihilism. PC’ers seek order and truth, though they want the content of these concepts to rest on negotiation and remain open to democratic debate. But, it must be asked, if all paradigms necessarily represent only partial social interests, can it be argued that the PC project is based on hypocrisy? We shall come back to this question later.

Finally, this introductory section will not be complete without asking whether PC is really no more than postmodernism in disguise. Is there a difference between

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S. Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech*, p. 57.
postmodernism, poststructuralism, and PC that makes discussion of the latter valuable on its own terms? PC is often equated with these theories, yet scholars tend to stop short of viewing them as identical. Jung Min Choi and John Murphy, whose book *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* is one of the few to offer a comprehensive analysis of PC, contend that:

While PC is not synonymous with postmodernism, they are associated because of their respective positions on the interpretive or non-dualistic character of reality. Therefore referring to PC as the postmodern alternative is somewhat justified. In each case, language use extends to the core of existence and defies objectification.\(^7\)

By “alternative” the authors mean that PC, if practiced, can become a social haven. In other words, the difference between postmodernism and PC is that the latter supposedly informs the social life in a way that the former does not. While postmodernism, poststructuralism and PC are all suspicious of non-linguistic foundations, only PC aspires to translate this principle into action by opening up the discussion, identifying and lifting barriers to freedom of speech, in effect paving the way to a society based solely on debate and consent.\(^8\) Nevertheless, the difference between PC and postmodernism, according to Choi and Murphy, is mostly a matter of intention and thus becomes quite difficult to draw.

Similarly, Steven Watts argues that although there is a close affinity between poststructuralism and the recent “discourse radicalism” of the American left, it would be “stretching things” to say that all parties to this discourse are poststructuralists.\(^9\) Yet Watts too fails to offer a finer demarcation between poststructuralism and PC. It is evident, then, that PC and postmodernism share a common theoretical background;

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\(^7\) J.M. Choi and J.W. Murphy, *The Politics and Philosophy of Politically Correctness*, p. 57.

\(^8\) Ibid, pp. 4-7.

indeed, the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan – the “fathers” of postmodernism and poststructuralism – are a source of great influence on the PC movement. PC, though, goes one step farther, adding a practical component that postmodernism and poststructuralism reject. While the latter two are theories, or “attitudes” as Michel Foucault puts it, PC is a social movement, and as such must be considered on its own terms. To be able to appreciate the novelty of the PC movement and to differentiate the symptoms from their roots, it is necessary to contextualize this debate and introduce its protagonists. As will be seen, the origins of the PC movement and the history of this concept are an integral part of the battle to control social concepts and in fact reflect the essence of PC.

The Protagonists of the American PC Debate

The PC debate encapsulates the fragmentation of American consensus theory since the 1960’s. The pre-1960’s consensus theory “held that there was wide agreement among Americans on such liberal values as individualism, individual liberty, political equality, economic opportunity, and consent of the governed.” The 1960’s were a decade of social upheaval in the United States. Three central processes brought about the collapse of the consensus theory; the first belongs to history in actu, the latter two to intellectual circles. From the perspective of history in actu, the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, characterized by the growing civil-rights movements and the Vietnam War, led to the emergence of “countercultural alternatives [that] turned attention away from the ‘American character’ and focused it on the picture of a divided nation seen from ‘the

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Being "American" no longer signified "a legitimate...identity" since "the culture at large...lost its legitimacy." These sentiments soon found their way into intellectual circles. Cracks began to appear in the assumption that the history of America was indeed a story of consensus. Beginning in the 1960's and going well into the 1970's, consensual theory was nullified first as an accurate description of American history, and second as a desirable moral objective. Instead, a new consensus emerged, which portrayed America as a "multiracial" and "multicultural" society: "feminist, African-American, Native American, Latino, gay, and lesbian voices joined...scholars who denied the historical validity of consensus interpretations..." This "alliance" enabled these "new voices" – generally referred to, in the aggregate, as the New Left – to enter American intellectual life, heralding a period of unprecedented diversity and pluralism.

For some, these developments were too radical. Not long after this "burst of diversity," a counterattack was mounted in the 1970's. A group of "old leftists" – Irving Kristol, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer and Daniel Bell among others, for whom the New Left’s agenda became too radical and who maintained that liberalism had "lost its moral and political bearing," – founded what came to be known as neoconservatism. Its objective was to create a "new synthesis" between the social left and the conservative right. On American campuses too, according to Nathan Glazer, the New Left’s radicalism had reactionary consequences: "The student revolt...served to

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16 Ibid, pp. 35-6.
17 Ibid, p. 41.
19 The concept 'neoconservatism' was coined by socialist critic Michael Harrington.
20 I. Kristol, Reflections of a Neoconservative, p. xii.
deepen the estrangement from radicalism of others like myself who saw it as a threat to the university and to the values of which the university, with all its faults, was a unique and precious embodiment."\(^{21}\) The New Left and the neoconservatives are the two main antagonists in the PC debate.

As was noted earlier, the New Left is made up of various "special interest"\(^{22}\) groups such as civil rights advocates, feminists and multiculturalists, that sprang from the mostly "old" Marxist leftist camp beginning in 1960's and since. According to Stanley Fish, the diversity of the New Left is "insufficiently general to serve as the basis for a program, or a course, or a standard of judgment."\(^{23}\) Meaning, in other words, that the New Left is not, and should not be taken as, an ideology. However, as a postmodernist, Fish may be overstating the absence of "programming" in the New Left. That these groups pursue diverse social goals does not contradict the possible existence of shared assumptions: achieving conceptual change as a means of enhancing equality is but one example. Indeed, as with all leftist movements, the driving force of the New Left's social agenda was the thrust for greater equality. While the destruction of the class system as the way to achieve equality is the legacy of the "old" left, the novel element of the New Left was the claim that equality must transcend economic grievances and include also identity-generating groups, such as gender, race and ethnicity, which, new leftists maintained, possess "traits" from which inequality and discrimination stem. It was, Geoff Andrews asserts, a process of "radical modernization,"\(^{24}\) premised on the desire to democratize a whole culture. The elite-led state system, the New Left

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\(^{22}\) S. Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech*, p. 7.
\(^{23}\) Ibid.
proclaimed, was no longer capable of meeting changing social needs, so a new form of politics, able to accommodate popular participation, was required.25

Concurrent with these developments, though divorced from social problems, the postmodern, poststructural anti-foundation revolution, seeking equality in and through language, had its debut on the American intellectual scene in the 1970’s. From literature to legal thought, the impact of postmodernism on American intellectuals such as Richard Rorty, Michael Shapiro, and Stanley Fish, to name but a few, was sweeping.26 Radicalism was now catching up with language, which, in turn, was viewed as “a crucial but shaky affair...as all concepts at all times are involved in an open-ended, ongoing process of signification.”27 The New Left soon appropriated this theory. Steven Watts contends that the all-encompassing embrace of postmodernism by the American intellectual left was a reaction to the rightward drift of American society during the 1970’s. Alienated and estranged from society, this “linguistic radicalism,” Watts argues, gave the intellectual left something to be radical about as it moved steadily from political activism to the “politics of discourse.” Poststructuralism and postmodernism turned the New Left into a “linguistic left” preoccupied with discursive manipulation, excessive textualization and a growing avoidance of social reality.28 Referring to the growing gap between the language of the left and the world, Peter Emberley adds that fewer and fewer people could understand the “pseudo-intellectual jargon” of the cultural left; leftists, Emberley writes, have “swamped ordinary language with obscurantism, permitting

have “swamped ordinary language with obscurantism, permitting much political posturing but offering little constructive insight into the real sources of injustice.”

While the left was preoccupied with its new social-linguistic perception and steadily turning away from the “inadequate” liberal center, neoconservatism took its first steps towards claiming this “middle ground” as its rightful heritage. The neoconservatives’ new defense of liberalism was accompanied by a conceptual change in the content of the concept PC. For this reason, the neoconservative contribution to the PC debate is perhaps best represented through the history of this concept, which we will now examine.

**PC: Manifold Meanings**

Like any other concept, the meaning of PC depends on whom you ask. Many scholars rightly observe that much confusion exists in the meaning and use of this concept; so much so that Morris Dickstein was prompted to conclude that “it should be retired forthwith.” Yet insofar as PC entails conceptual change, this confusion is part of the history of PC. In fact, by examining the concept’s origins we may well be able to remove the confusion. An historical survey of the PC concept shows that much of the ambiguity associated with it was consciously promoted by neoconservatives, who sought to change its meaning. In its contemporary use, the concept PC is divorced from its original meaning, in fact denoting its exact opposite. As a result, even those who have been closely involved in promoting PC are dissociating themselves from it. In short, it has become politically incorrect to be “politically correct.” At the same time, an

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examination of the history of the concept sheds light on a second source of confusion that is generated, albeit unconsciously, by PC’ers. PC is at once both a social movement involved in a process of social change (as manifested in the “culture war”) and also the method by which this change is sought (changing concepts as a means of effecting conceptual change); in other words, PC is a social movement that seeks to bring about social change by means of changing concepts and in this sense it is both a movement and a method, a theory and a practice.

The term “politically correct” was first used in 1793 in the US Supreme Court by James Wilson who objected to the wording of the common toast: “The United States,” he said, “instead of the ‘People of the United States’ is the toast given. This is not politically correct.” Wilson did not use the term conceptually but literally, arguing that the existing toast was not aligned with the “correct” (i.e. prevailing) American political theory. Thus it cannot be said that this occasion marks the birth of the concept. The term did not resurface in America until the 1930’s, when it was used in socialist and communist circles. It was then invoked by American socialists against American communists, who wanted to portray the latter as rigid dogmatic moralists, uncritically accepting any Communist Party policy. By referring to communists as “politically correct,” the socialists meant to separate their belief in equality as a moral ideal from the stance they claimed was taken by the dogmatic communists who advocated and defended the Communist Party’s positions regardless of its moral substance. Contrary to current

32 Ibid.
33 Feldstein, Political Correctness, p. 4.
usage, socialists used the term to signify that “they take pride in thinking for themselves.”

How, then, did PC come to mean the exact opposite, associated with militancy and totalitarianism?

Before the term was appropriated by neoconservatives and in fact became a concept, it went through one more stage, which might have contributed to its reversal of meaning. On the left, during the 1960’s, PC was used ironically to delineate one’s political position (which might be “correct”) from one’s personality (which was found lacking). Eugene Goodheart recalls that he first heard the phrase from a woman of the left “as a prelude to a critical judgment,” when the woman said about her colleague: “Her attitudes were politically correct, but” her political attitude was insufficient to offset her personality; that is, the fact that one holds the “correct” political view, does not necessarily mean that one’s personality is immediately accepted. Goodheart adds that “the tone of irony with which she spoke the phrase was intended to distance herself from the vulgarity and tyranny implied by ‘political correctness.’”

Between the 1950’s and 1980’s, the American right regrouped as a powerful political movement. Building a solid coalition consisting, among others, of the Old Right, neoconservatives, New Right and libertarians, these groups were able to transcend immediate interests and “focus their resources on cultural change.” The neoconservative appropriation of the concept PC in the early 1980’s was part of this “cultural change,” and it soon became a euphemism to attack what was once again portrayed as the radicalism of the left. It was at this point that “politically correct”

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37 Ibid, p. 552.
became "politically correctness" and it was set to be a "vast conspiracy" plotted by the left. That PC was initially invoked to signify critical thinking, or irony, became irrelevant. The association with Communism was enough to provoke waves of antagonism. Given the history of the concept, writes Herbert Kohl, "I was surprised to hear right-wing intellectuals in the 1990's using the phrase 'politically correct' to disparage students and professors who advocate multiculturalism and are willing to confront racism, sexism, or homophobia at the university."^40

To the extent that PC is a movement of conceptual change, neoconservatives follow PC assumptions as much as their leftist opponents. Both are battling over conceptual control as a means of gaining social control. On both sides of the debate language is seen as an institution amenable to manipulation and individual modification. In both cases language is being altered in order to fit shifting political needs, and in this process concepts are being disconnected from their history and being given a new one. Both parties to the debate are pursuing political interests. There is, however, an important difference. While the left is advocating a conceptual change by introducing new concepts or by infusing existing concepts with new content, neoconservatives are preoccupied with what Teresa Brennan calls "a language appropriation." The Right, she argues, has seized "the language of change that has been the Left's hitherto,"^41 leaving the left without a language in which to argue its case. Yet this linguistic takeover has gone farther than that. While PC'ers are denying the appropriateness of the liberal paradigm to accommodate the changing social circumstances, the neoconservatives have managed to establish

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themselves as the true defenders of the liberal tradition, ostensibly fighting for the preservation of free speech and thought.

Note, for example, Peter Drucker's use of language against the PC'ers whom he describes as "the new barbarians...the deconstructionists, the radical feminists, the gay and lesbian liberationists" when he writes:

Fortunately, there are signs that the academia is beginning to realize the danger and is beginning to fight back, especially against the imposition of politically correctness on freedom of thought and speech...The real task is to restore the liberal arts to responsibility, to commitment, to being "liberal" in other words.

This short passage exemplifies what neoconservatives are doing with language. First we see how Drucker depicts PC as a regime of fear and danger, ruling the campuses, which, in turn, are portrayed as a war zone. Second, his comment about the imposition of PC on the freedoms of thought and speech is an act of ideological reversal in which neoconservatives hijack the liberal legacy. The left, which is proposing a new untraditional social and educational agenda, is described as the camp that sets limits on thought and speech. But, like many neoconservatives, Drucker fails to acknowledge that the cry to "fight back" against the "new barbarians" itself falls short of a full commitment to freedom of thought and speech. Drucker's position is not only theoretically confused but also internally contradictory: the contradiction between advocating free speech and the neoconservatives' fierce fight against the emergence of "new voices" on American campuses is never addressed.

Although this process is indeed one of conceptual change, it remains distinct from the conceptual change sought by the left because of the reasons discussed above; the leftists' PC, rather than its neoconservative version, is the focus of this chapter. In what

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43 Ibid, p. 63.
follows, we will explicate and analyze both the symptoms and root causes of the PC debate in order to examine what is done to language and what is done with language.

*The Symptoms: Fighting over Words*

The discrepancy between "symptoms" and "roots" is reflected in the way different scholars have defined the concept PC, emphasizing its manifestations – the action that is supposedly taken in its name – rather than its theoretical components. Robert Brustein, for example, contends that PC is a "popular phrase" for "the current method of increasing the rights of minorities" on American campuses. The method, he asserts, consists of new regulations such as "speech codes, revised canons, new departments, lowered standards, increased pressure for faculty and student diversity, excessive vigilance regarding the sensitivity of minorities." Morris Dickstein argues that PC "is a form of groupthink fueled by paranoia and demonology and imposed by political and social intimidation." All forms of political intolerance and conformity are considered by Dickstein to be manifestations of PC. It follows, Dickstein argues, that PC is not an exclusively leftist phenomenon; the right too had its "PC moments:" "nothing could be more PC than the rigid ideological test applied during the Reagan and Bush years to all prospective appointments to the Supreme Court." Eugene Goodheart provides another catch-all definition of PC that transcends the political right-left spectrum by describing it as a "doctrine of opportunism." Since the "correct" view

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45 Ibid.
46 M. Dickstein "Correcting PC," ibid, p. 543.
changes from time to time, "such opportunism is not a matter of left or right." The prevailing "correctness," Goodheart claims, stems from the left and is based on the exclusion of those who do not agree with the view that "all evils of the modern world [spring] from Western imperialism, and who are concerned with the discovery of commonalities among people rather than difference."

It is not surprising then, that on the topic of language much of the literature focuses on the "symptoms" of PC. This partly symptomatic aspect of PC involves the imposition of speech codes in American campuses, a topic that sparks much literary heat and evokes intimidating Orwellian images such as "thought police" and "groupthink." PC is a "cultural comedy," Goodheart asserts, in which short people are described as "vertically challenged" and handicapped people are "differently abled." "The comedy" he writes, "lies in the euphemistic solemnity of the phrases." Yet Goodheart underestimates the seriousness of some of these projects. Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf's book *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, classified as a "satire and humor" book, is one such example.

In the introduction to the *Dictionary*, Beard and Cerf explain that the book was written for oppressors, victims and those who are not sure whether they are the former or the latter to help all of them "survive in the be-sensitive-or-else nineties" and clarify

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 The other part of the free speech debate involves works of radical feminists who are promoting the idea that there are words (and images) that hurt in exactly the same way action does. Since this part of the free speech debate is considered here to be associated with the conceptual revolution propagated by PC, it is discussed in the section that deals with its roots rather than the symptoms of the PC movement.
"what's OK to say to whom, what isn't, and why." The Dictionary contains entries such as "indefinitely idled: unemployed" and "lookism: the belief that appearance is an indicator of a person's value," and all entries are referenced to their source (Executive Recruiter News, 1990, and handout published by the Smith College Office of Student Affairs, 1990, respectively). Beard and Cerf are not, as Goodheart has it, "comedians," since their work carries a serious message. Echoing Watts' and Emberley's critique, they write:

...as linguists...suspected as early as the 1940's – and postmodern theory has confirmed – language is not merely the mirror of society; it is the major force in "constructing" what we perceive as "reality." With this in mind, it's easy to see why so many reformers have forsworn a unified assault on such distracting side issues such as guaranteeing equal pay for equal work; eliminating unemployment, poverty, and homelessness...in order to devote their energies to correcting fundamental linguistic inequities...

The Dictionary, then, is an evaluation of the left, from the left, which, in turn, is critiqued for losing sight of society. That being said, it is important to note that although intended as a critique of the left, the authors actually fail to distinguish between what William Lutz described as "double-speak," – a "language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't...[a] language that makes bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable" and is often used by politicians to disguise their real motives and actions by using manipulative language – with the PC project. PC's goal is not to misrepresent reality, as Beard and Cerf have it. Thus, although they are correct in discerning the theory of the PC project, Beard and Cerf fail to identify its practice thus, unconsciously, contributing to the confusion surrounding this concept.

56 Ibid, p. 36.
57 Ibid, p. 42.
Promoting equality in language as a means of creating greater equality in society, the PC project is manifested primarily in the invention of new words and the substitution of discriminatory and "offensive" terms with "neutral" ones, in an effort to create a language that is not abusive and is free of prejudice or any other aspect that could be deemed hurtful to traditionally "objectified" minority groups such as women, gays, and African-Americans. The idea is to disarm language from its judgmental tendencies. The "old" language is perceived as prejudiced and degrading since it describes minorities from a "master's" (i.e. "white male") perspective, or fails to acknowledge the inclusion of minorities in various social activities. A case in point is Margaret Doyle's *The A-Z of Non-Sexist Language*. Sexist language, she writes, consists of "terms and usages that exclude or discriminate against women" and is based on the presumption that "maleness is standard, the norm, and that femaleness is non-standard, or the exception." Words and phrases such as "bellboy," "businessman," and "mankind" constitute "sexist language." This type of usage, Doyle argues, must be changed because it "is unclear and inaccurate, because it excludes more than half of the population, because it encourages destructive stereotypes, because it hurts." The lexicon includes, for example, the phrase: "Man or mouse, are you a?," followed by Doyle's advice to language users: "Avoid this challenge altogether, unless using ironically. If necessary, replace with something more descriptive. Options: brave or meek, tough or timid." In another part of the book, Doyle lists female-oriented neologisms that are intended to supplement the male-based

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61 Ibid, p. 3.
language: *herstory* (instead of history) *womyn/wimmin* (to replace woman/women) and *womage* (as opposed to manage).\(^{63}\)

Notwithstanding, Doyle makes very clear that there are limits to the use of her guide. In fact, these limits make it possible to disregard this project completely:

The intention of the book is not to obliterate words or usages from the language...If a term or usage is not objectionable to you, and if you feel that it will not appear sexist to others, and especially if you feel that no suitable alternative can be found, you will probably want to use that term. Its inclusion in the book is not meant to indicate that it should be ‘banned’ from use.\(^{64}\)

What then does it indicate? Why does Doyle stop short of “banning” certain words? In the attempt to eliminate ambiguities in language a new ambiguity is introduced. One possible reason for this caution might be Doyle’s explicit desire to dissociate herself from the PC project which, she contends, stands in opposition to everything that inclusive languages represents: “inclusive language is not narrow and prescriptive; it does not aim to create a canon of ‘politically correct’ words.”\(^{65}\) Nor is PC “narrow and prescriptive,” though in the great “language war” it has become a captive in the hands of neoconservatives who are successfully representing it as such. Ironically, Doyle dissociates herself from the way PC is wrongly represented by Beard and Cerf, although they too are critiquing it. What, then, is PC?

*The Roots: A Conceptual Revolution*

We saw that both parties to the PC debate are seeking to control concepts in order to shape their content and histories. Yet to the extent that PC’ers are expanding and renewing shared concepts, only the left is involved in propagating a conceptual

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63 Ibid, p. 42.  
64 Ibid, p. 7.  
65 Ibid, p. 5.
revolution. Neoconservatives, contrary to the New Left, are not proposing a new social agenda – a new set of shared concepts – but instead are involved in changing their position on the political continuum, from the right to the center, seeking to revive the “old” consensus. Seen from this perspective, Choi and Murphy underestimate the scope and depth of the PC’s movement aspirations when they argue that “PC’ers propose symbolic changes that could alter everything.”

PC’s program for change is far from being symbolic, even though it might appear as such; seemingly, all that needs to happen is that people view the polis differently. But before this can occur there must be a drastic shift at the core of the social life. In this section two such shifts are examined. The first draws on the work of Stanley Fish, who has been actively promoting conceptual change for more than twenty years. We will examine the way Fish redefines the concepts “truth” and “reason,” basing his proposal on his postmodern position, which is softened by his PC’ism. The second conceptual change that will be considered is sought by radical feminists working to eliminate the distinction between “words” and “action.” Words, according to these feminists, hurt in exactly the same way actions do.

“We are all politically correct,” says Stanley Fish, meaning, we are all “political” and we are all “correct.” While this statement can be seen as an attempt to dismantle the concept of PC into its literal meaning, Fish is aiming higher than that. Not only is he reiterating the postmodern conviction that “everything is political,” he is also striving to “win back” control over the concept of PC, suggesting that it is a “state of

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67 S. Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech*, p. 79.
mind,” our “social condition,” which allows us always to operate only “on the basis of partial vision,” as he writes:

Political correctness, the practice of making judgments from the vantage point of challengeable convictions, is not the name of a deviant behavior but of the behavior that everyone necessarily practices. Debates between opposing parties can never be characterized as debates between political correctness and something else, but between competing versions of political correctness. As was noted earlier, the fact that we are all “politically correct” is based on the conviction that language is the only real anchor of reality. What this means is that “words are responsible not to what is real but to what has been laid down as real,” and concepts are “empty” “until filled with whatever content and direction one can manage to put into them.” PC’ers invoke this argument as part of their battle against the dominant neoconservative foundationalist position. Yet while this approach stands firmly as the antithesis to neoconservatism, it should be examined on its own terms, in terms of its thesis. To do so, we will examine how Fish redefines the concept “truth.”

How do we know that something is “true”? According to the traditional view, “truth” is the product of an accurate reflection of the nature of reality. As such, “truth” transcends language, or else, language has the ability to mirror it. Hobbes expresses this relationship between language and truth when he says that “truth consisteth in the right ordering of names...a man that seeketh precise truth, had need to remember what every name he uses stands for; and to place it accordingly.” One condition for finding truth, then, is the correct use of language. And there is, according to Hobbes, a direct relation

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68 Ibid.
71 S. Fish, There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, p. 102.
72 J.M. Choi and J. W. Murphy, The Politics and Philosophy of Politically Correctness, p. 61.
between the way we use language and the path to truth. Hobbes though, is by no means suggesting, as PC’ers do, that truth is determined by language. From a different point of view, though still non-linguistic, we have seen that logical positivists attempted to develop tools for measuring the truth-value and meaning of statements; this project extended into language when logical positivists tried to develop an ideal language that would allow all that can be said to be said clearly and all statements to relate to one another in a purely logical way.\(^74\)

In the eyes of foundationalists, truth has nothing to do with language. It has to do with developing the right tools for discovering it, since truth is “out there” in the natural world waiting to be uncovered. Since truth is natural, Allan Bloom contends, “nature should be the standard by which we judge our own lives and the lives of peoples.”\(^75\) Reason is a key tool in man’s search for the truth. Since man is the only creature endowed with the capacity to reason, the path to truth is to follow reason. Bloom defends this claim against the counter-PC (and postmodern) claim that only culture (that is, language) can lay a basis for truth. And while Bloom does not explicitly refer to the idea that standards are a linguistic product as proposed by PC’ers, the inference is justified. In language, as Herder said, resides the whole of man’s domain, “its traditions, history, religion, and the basis of life, all its heart and soul.”\(^76\) Thus, Bloom’s rejection of culture as the basis for truth is equivalent to the rejection of language as such.

The belief that “truth” is natural is of course hardly new. Philosophers, from Plato to Kant, believed that truth is natural, waiting to be discovered. Neoconservatives merely


reiterate and defend this position. The motives for this defense—opportunistic or sincere—are part of the so-called “culture war” and as such are not of immediate relevance. What is relevant is the fact that neoconservatives claim that there is One Truth and that there are fixed procedures and set standards for judging it. PC’ers have two rejoinders to this, both of which echo the postmodern attitude. In the first place, they claim, “truth” is not “one.” Since there are many languages, and since in language we find the measures to judge our world, there are many truths. Truth is plural and “flow[s] from local contexts;” it is only tentatively a certainty. Secondly, PC’ers argue, not only is truth not “one” or “natural,” but to regard it as such is part of the elite’s political agenda. Representing the “truth” as an artifact waiting to be discovered is nothing but a “formula” advanced by those who have the skill and resources to spread their own version of the “truth,” thus serving the vested interest they have in maintaining their status. The strategy for attaining a monopoly on the truth, Fish argues, is as follows: “First detach your agenda from its partisan origins, from its history, and then present it as a universal imperative, as a call to moral arms so perspicuous that only the irrational or the godless (two categories often conflated) could refuse it.”

The argument against having “one truth” goes further. PC’ers not only deny the idea of impartial truth detached from history, they also reject the prevailing methods for knowing it. Reason, Fish contends, cannot guide us in our search for “truth” since the process of “reasoning” is premised on one’s faith; that is, “reason” is developed only to confirm what one already believes. He adds: “Reasons...are extensions of your faith and are reasons for you because what you already believe at a level so fundamental that it is

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77 S. Fish, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech*, p. 8.
78 Ibid.
not (at least while you are in the grip of belief) available for self-conscious scrutiny.”

Fish here not only repudiates the trust in “reason” he also provides us with insight into the process by which this is done: one simply frees oneself from the grip of belief; heightened awareness becomes the key to overcoming “fundamental faiths” and entrenched beliefs. Stated differently, Fish is asking us to overcome our prejudices. Leaving the complexity (and doubtful success) of this enterprise aside, a different aspect of this claim becomes immediately problematic. What Fish is asking us to believe is premised on one universal demand: we must first believe that the “truth” is plural and “local” before we can go ahead and find our own contingent truth. Lurking behind the assumption that “truths” are numerous and various is one universal truth. It is in this sense that the PC project is hypocritical. Fish, too, advances his own belief using universal language.

Instead of through reason, PC’ers tell us, “truth” is known through rhetoric, interpretation and persuasion. It is at this point, Choi and Murphy argue, that PC differs from postmodernism and becomes a praxis, “a domain where social life can be invented and constantly redeployed in any number of forms.”

PC according to Choi and Murphy, offers a premise for a true democratic and just society, where each is given an equal opportunity to influence the life of the society. Like in the Greek polis, rhetoric once again becomes a tool for searching and negotiating truth, the basis for constructing “certainties,” as Fish writes:

If...you begin with a sense of the constructed nature of human reality...then the notion of the rhetorical is no longer identified with the ephemeral, the outside, but is reconceived as the

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80 J.M. Choi and J.W. Murphy, The Politics and Philosophy of Politically Correctness, p. xiii.
medium in which certainties become established, in which formidable traditions emerge, [and] are solidified...⁸¹

By promoting the power of rhetoric, Fish is again involved in a conceptual shift. In the prevailing liberal paradigm, he argues, rhetoric is "an evil gesture in which the 'real' is overwhelmed."⁸² But, like Skinner, Fish believes he can change the direction of this concept: "To call oneself a sophist is rhetorically effective...you begin by saying, "I am a sophist," and then...unashamedly...explain why for you this is not a declaration of moral guilt."⁸³ Fish is not suggesting that "truth" cannot be established or that "truth" is meaningless, rather rhetoric is taken to be the starting point for knowing it and the vehicle for establishing knowledge in general. But how are we to assess different social positions, if language is the only standard against which "truth" is measured? Is Fish suggesting that all truths are equal?

To protect himself against this inevitable and undesirable conclusion, Fish relies on interpretation as the procedure through which one strand of rhetoric becomes acceptable among the members of what he calls an "interpretive community." According to Fish we all live in "interpretive communities," which are structures of norms that inform language.⁸⁴ The idea of an "interpretive community" is an attempt to translate the notion of language-game into practice, yet being an abstract philosophical concept, it is hard to imagine how a "language-game" can become a practice. Communication and understanding, Fish asserts, do not occur because agents "share a language, in the sense of knowing the meanings of individual words and the rules for combining them, but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of

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⁸¹ S. Fish, There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, p. 290.
⁸² Ibid.
⁸⁴ S. Fish, Is There a Text in this Class? pp. 303-321.
already-in-place objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values and so on;" language, he adds “is always perceived within a structure of norms.” Once again, Wittgenstein’s spirit is present; but while for Wittgenstein language precedes norms, Fish wants to argue the reverse: that norms precede language. But where do norms come from, if not from language? Interpretation is the key to unlocking this seemingly tautology. From the point of view of an “interpretive community,” “truth” means shared concepts that are based on local history and depends on the ability “to tell a persuasive story that follows from and extends one’s deepest convictions.” Seen from this perspective, “one’s deepest convictions” are inherent, and in fact inform language. Yet “convictions” are not necessarily tantamount with “truth;” in fact, history teaches us that when “one’s deepest convictions” are taken to be the only measure for truth, horrendous actions sometimes follow. The social sphere, according to PC’ers, is made up of individuals driven by convictions, which they wish to communicate and share with other fellow individuals in an effort to consolidate these sentiments as the “truth;” language is their tool for achieving this goal. Yet, in spite of the problems that might arise from this position, what is important to underline is that PC’ers are not claiming that the concepts “truth” and “reason” are invalid; PC’ers reject the dominant contemporary interpretation of the “truth” as something that can be found and based on objective “natural” knowledge. They do not, however, succeed in offering a better solution.

Things become even more complex as Marilyn Friedman attempts to articulate the way in which “truth” is approached: “The real problem does not lie in the concept of truth in its pristine abstraction. The real problem is to discern which of the many

87 S. Fish, The Problem with Principles, p. 287.
competing accounts of debated subject matters shall be deemed the truest account...”

We have already stated the difficulty of this enterprise and the serious questions that arise from it. Here we want to ask a different question: if the problem is not with “truth in its pristine abstraction” does this mean that in its “pristine abstraction,” truth is natural? If not, then, it too becomes a “political entity.” Seen from this perspective, it is actually the liberal interpretation of the concept “truth” that PC is rejecting, while setting aside the origins of the pursuit of truth in general. This line of thought may render the concept of “truth” in general part of a political agenda promoted by various social agents. Is the concept “truth” relevant to the successful operation of a social community, especially if that community is composed of many “truths”? It is of course not possible to answer this question here. What is important to underline is that this aspect of PC, vigorously represented by Fish, strives to offer a new basis for engaging in society, one that is rooted solely in language, and as such encounters not only theoretical problems but also, and more importantly, serious practical complications. In contrast to this outcome, the second type of conceptual change, sought by radical feminists, which we now turn to examine, is premised on action (although it too occurs only at the linguistic level) and thus is more successful in extending itself into the world.

In their search for greater equality in and through speech, radical feminists such as Patricia Hill-Collins, Catharine MacKinnon and Mari Matsuda, otherwise pursuing different social agendas, call for redefining hate speech and pornography, now protected in America as free speech under the First Amendment of the United States constitution,

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as an illegal act. Hate speech and pornography they argue, although expressed in language, are harmful and hurtful acts; protecting them as “free speech” ignores the fact that “words have power.” Because, in the view of these theorists, there are cases in which “words hurt” and should therefore be treated as actions, both legally and theoretically, they seek conceptual change. Their paramount contention is that treating all forms of speech equally, generates inequality in the world. Therefore, only by acknowledging that not all forms of speech are equally valid will it be possible to achieve social equality. Seen from this perspective, these theorists are in effect arguing for inequality as a means of attaining greater equality. The achievement of this goal entails a conceptual change.

That hate speech, pornography, homophobic speech, and the denial of the Holocaust are protected as free speech, Matsuda argues in Where is Your Body? reduces the First Amendment to nothing but a mere formalism. In protecting absolute free speech, she asserts, the First Amendment makes a false distinction between speech and content, disregarding the fact that speech is meaningful only within a social context and as such conveys a social message. All speech, Matsuda asserts, is content: “a simple ‘Good Morning’ can convey love, harassment, indifference, threat of violence, pleasure, anger or insanity, depending on the context.” By treating all forms of speech equally and disregarding their social message it becomes “okay to speak with the intent of

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89 Stanley Fish, too shares this position, and has expressed it in essays such as: “There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It’s a Good Thing Too,” “Jerry Falwell’s Mother, or, What’s the Harm?” in There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech.
91 Ibid, pp. 95-6.
92 Ibid, pp. 84-6.
93 Ibid, p. 86.
silencing, wounding, degrading, excluding, and cutting another person to their core."\textsuperscript{94} The root of the problem, according to Matsuda, is that the First Amendment is premised on an absolute free-speech/censorship dichotomy. To repair this state of affairs, she explores the idea of "different kinds of contents," which, she argues, goes beyond this dichotomy. In its stead, new categories for measuring speech are put forward: dissent vs. assault, and tolerance of difference vs. tolerance of subordination. Classifying different forms of speech must be based on history: "I define subordination contextually so that the exclusion of gays must be understood in light of the history of homophobia and violence against gays. The Holocaust hoax tracts must be understood in light of the history of anti-Semitism and genocide against the Jews."\textsuperscript{95} Anticipating the inevitable "drawing the line" dilemma, Matsuda writes: "The know-nothingness of pure tolerance is an inadequate response in a world of growing violence, and, in my view, does not achieve freedom."\textsuperscript{96} Can free speech be restricted and still be considered "free-speech"? That is a possibility, but only in the wake of conceptual change. After all, we do not complain that one's freedom is infringed when one has engaged in actions such as theft or murder and was taken to prison. Are words qualitatively different than acts?

In her book \textit{Only Words}, Catharine MacKinnon unambiguously rejects the absolute differentiation between language and action. It is this categorization, she argues, that legitimates pornography. Currently in the US pornography is interpreted literally as an "image," that is, as an embodiment of an expression, in the same way that speech is an expression.\textsuperscript{97} Like hate speech, discussed above, pornography is protected under the First

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, p. 96.  
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, p. 98.  
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.  
Amendment since it is understood as a message. Objecting to this representation, MacKinnon rhetorically asks:

There are many ways to say what pornography says, in the sense of its content. But nothing else does what pornography does. The question becomes, do the pornographers — saying they are only saying what it says — have a speech right to do what only it does?\(^{98}\)

Emphasizing the symbiosis between words and actions and their causal relationship, MacKinnon, in support of her argument that pornography is in fact action and must be redefined as such, refers to a dual process: making pornography, and its impact on society. The protection of pornography as speech overlooks the “before and after” aspect of its production. MacKinnon is not referring here only to the subordination of women that pornography encourages, or to its immorality. She is much more explicit in her reference to action. What makes pornography different from others kinds of speech (even hate speech) is that it is action-based, and has action-oriented consequences in real life.\(^{99}\)

To realize this conceptual change MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin proposed a new law that makes clear that what pornography does, it does through what it says: “graphic sexually explicit materials that subordinate women through pictures and words.”\(^{100}\) This is perhaps the most explicit example of conceptual change that is sought in language: laws, as we know, are first framed in words, and only subsequently translated into action. However, from the point of view taken in this essay, we see how the “social” is redefined and changed in language, but contrary to the change sought by Fish, this change expresses itself in action.

From a different perspective, Patricia Hill-Collins discusses the correlation between speech and ideas by rethinking the “fighting words” doctrine. “Fighting words,”

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\(^{98}\) Ibid, pp. 14-5.  
\(^{100}\) Ibid, p. 22.
as defined by the US court in 1942, are words "which by their very utterance inflict
injury or tend to incite an immediate breach of the peace."\textsuperscript{101} Hate speech is protected
under the First Amendment, unless it can be proven that a specific utterance posed a
"clear and present danger"\textsuperscript{102} to society. If hate speech were subsumed under the category
"fighting words," it would lose its constitutional protection and be regulated. Moreover,
Hill-Collins calls for extending the reach of "fighting words" beyond hate speech into the
realm of academic theorizing. Academic speech, she argues, also operates as a form of
"fighting words." Although academic speech "may not intentionally set to harm its
victims (unlike hate speech), its actual effects may be similar.\textsuperscript{103} Hill-Collins equates
words (hate speech) and ideas (theories explaining race and gender) as tools in the
process of elite power building, and rejects both on these grounds.\textsuperscript{104}

At the same time, contrary to Matsuda and MacKinnon, Hill-Collins opposes the
idea of regulating (i.e. censoring) "fighting words." Doing that, she maintains, would be
"fighting fire with fire."\textsuperscript{105} The type of thinking that would regulate "fighting words"
merely duplicates the binary-oppositional approach (e.g. White/Black, man/woman,
public/private, center/margin, powerful/powerless, reason/emotion), which is responsible
for generating "fighting words" in the first place.\textsuperscript{106} A real solution necessitates thinking
differently. Instead of the binary-oppositional model, Hill-Collins suggests critical social
theory as the means of diffusing the power relations that underlie binary oppositions.

Social theory "is a body of knowledge and a set of institutional practices that actively

\textsuperscript{101} Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire, 315 U.S. 568, 569 (1942), at 571-72. Quoted in M. Friedman and J.
Narveson, Politically Correctness: For and Against, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{103} P. Hill-Collins, Fighting Words (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 85.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, pp. 84-6.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{106} ibid, p. 87.
grapples with the central questions facing a group of people in a specific political, social, and historic context." It is "critical" since it is committed to justice, for one's group and/or for others. Its advantage over the binary model, Hill-Collins writes, is that it opens up a space for any group to theorize about social issues and undermines the elite's attempt to monopolize knowledge.

Together, the work of Matsuda, MacKinnon and Hill-Collins allows us to observe a different aspect of PC, one which, although it begins in language, is able to transcend it and become a true informer of action. It underlines the fact that while as a whole PC is a political theory and a social practice that is dedicated to achieving conceptual change, this process assumes multiple paths and enjoys varying degrees of success.

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107 Ibid, p. xii.
Conclusion

This essay began by stating that concepts change their meaning and suggested that an examination of the relationship between language and action – the two forces that drive the *polis* – can illuminate the process of change. Three distinct models of conceptual change were presented and discussed through their language-action axis. Together, these models underline an important trend in contemporary political theory and practice. We will now briefly review the essence of these models, recapitulating their perception of language and action in the process of conceptual change.

The first model, put forward by Reinhart Koselleck, identified conceptual change as the outcome of a crisis, which had occurred as language and action became disassociated and lost their integral coherence. According to this model, language and action assume an equal role in both the process of change and in the course of historical analysis. This is so, because language and action, while mutually dependent, are nevertheless separate entities that generate distinct paths of change; in some cases action is pre-linguistic, in others, language predetermines action. Thus, language and action are never completely congruent. The propounder of the second model, Quentin Skinner, contends, contrary to Koselleck, that conceptual change results from acts that agents performed in speaking. Based on the idea that language is (sometimes) a form of action, Skinner argues that political innovation is a product of linguistic deeds. According to this model, "action," in the sense meant by Koselleck, is not fully present; rather, it is assumed that political theorists *did* things in language as a response to actions ("projects") that were taking place in the social sphere and consequentially action is accorded only secondary significance. Change is identified primarily in and through
language, and the relationship between language and action in the social sphere is
distorted in favor of language. In the model, adduced by the American PC movement,
action is almost invisible. Far from sometimes being a form of action, language becomes
the world. Language and action, according to this third model, cannot be discussed
separately; “action” is confined to the act of changing language.

We see, then, that since the “linguistic revolution” of the mid-twentieth century,
the role of language has become increasingly prominent in both political theory and
practice. Moreover, the growing influence of postmodernism – which seeks to
fragmentize the “metanarratives” of the polis and has had a clear impact on the PC
movement – also contributes to the neglect of action in favor of language. From the point
of view of political theory and practice, the problem is not so much the call to tear down
universalistic and oppresive narratives, but rather the inability (and professed refusal) of
postmodernism to provide an alternative social order that can exist outside the spheres of
language. To the extent that PC is a political theory and a social practice that seeks to
change action – that is, to change the polis – the growing attention to language over
action must be acknowledged and amended since this orientation distorts the social
sphere. Language alone cannot adequately inform our political theories and practices;
allowing language to dominate and define the social sphere has serious ramifications for
both theory and practice.

Let us first consider these implications from the point of view of theory. In his
essay “Political Theory and Practice,” Charles Taylor discusses the importance of theory
and its relation to practice. The central question of political theory, he asserts, is “what is
going on? What is really happening in society?"¹ A successful theory answers this question by “making explicit... a society’s life, i.e. a set of institutions and practices;”² in other words, a good theory makes our practices clearer. “To have a good theory,” Taylor asserts, “is to understand better what we are doing,”³ and thus to orient ourselves better in the world. A theory that is informed solely by language cannot fulfill this task successfully. “What is really going on” in the polis cannot be reduced to merely talking. That language is an extremely important aspect of our political lives is an indisputable fact. But, viewing the polis through the prism of language alone, assuming that everything that is “going on” is mediated by language, conditioned by it, and can be resolved by changing it, results in a theory that does not fully account for “a society’s life.” Conceptual change is sometimes a product of non-linguistic action, but the theory and practice of PC do not acknowledge this vital aspect of the “political.”

Furthermore, the overwhelming significance of language in relation to action has consequences for the ability of theory to guide practice. In his book The Old Regime and the Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville discusses the relationship between French “men of letters” and society towards the middle of the eighteenth century. What interests us is not the particular problems with which the French intellectual class of the time grappled, but the relationship between “letters” and the “world.” In the mid-eighteenth century, Tocqueville writes, intellectuals were looking to “rebuild society on some wholly new plan,”⁴ indulging in abstract and general plans of governance, uninformed by the actual

² Ibid, p. 73.
³ Ibid, p. 78.
experience of governing. On the one hand, this can be seen as an advantage. Lacking practical experience, those intellectuals were “bolder in their projects of innovation, fonder of theory and system, more prone to despise the teaching of antiquity and to rely on individual reason than is usually the case with speculative writers on politics.” We know that their projects were bold and innovative because we know their outcome: the French Revolution.

On the other hand, though, this intellectual tendency resulted in a divided political world, where social actors were divorced from political writers: the former were engaged in administration, the latter were enunciating principles. This, Tocqueville writes, culminated in a political world made up of two bodies: “Society proper, resting on a framework of tradition, confused and irregular in its organization, with a host of contradictory laws...and above this, an imaginary society, in which every thing was simple, harmonious, equitable, uniform and reasonable.” Tocqueville is by no means denying the great achievements of French intellectuals; indeed, he writes, the Revolution was in part engendered by their “vague expressions, abstract terms, ambitious words and literary phrases.” Nevertheless, he is quick to remind us, words alone cannot be our guide for action, “for what is a merit in an author is often a defect in a statesman, and characteristics which improve a book may be fatal to a revolution.”

What is the lesson to be learned from Tocqueville about the dangers of being over-sensitive to the use of language? It is mainly that our political language must be, at least in part, informed by practice. Language will never do justice to the world if it is

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6 Ibid, p. 178.
7 Ibid, p. 180.
8 Ibid.
informed solely by reason. Nor will political theory be of use if it is premised on the notion that “reality is language.” The power of words can become deceiving to those whose duty it is to think and make intelligible the world. Wittgenstein was right to claim that “words are deeds,” but this should not be construed to mean that all deeds are words. The consequences of overlooking action can be detrimental to political theory and practice; what these consequences might be in the contemporary context – a critical question for the student of the “political world” – will have to be answered elsewhere.

Bibliography


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