

FORUM: TIMES OF THE EVENT

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DESPITE SINGULARITY: THE EVENT AND ITS MANIFOLD
STRUCTURES OF REPETITIONFERNANDO ESPOSITO¹*Konstanzer Online-Publikations-System (KOPS)*URL: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:352-2-10jffmqnelz9k6>

ABSTRACT

This article's principle interest is in the "structures of repetition" that characterize supposedly singular events. The starting point for the analysis is Reinhart Koselleck's discussion of the event in "Structures of Repetition in Language and History." Koselleck perceived events as arising from metahistorical structures that characterize all human histories regardless of the eras in which they took place and are narrated. This article scrutinizes Koselleck's understanding of the event as well as the underlying "structures of repetition" shaping it. In considering the question of the temporality of the event, this article distinguishes three strata of repetitive structures. First, it examines a seemingly trivial historiographical structure of repetition of the event, which is the iterative proclamation of the return of the event. It then analyzes Koselleck's foundational, yet rarely truly appreciated, "Structures of Repetition in Language and History" and maps out the fundamental structures of repetition, which are the conditions of possibility of events. Finally, it hints at a further linguistic stratum of repetitive structures. In light of growing interest in Koselleck's work in both German and Anglophone historiography, this article systematizes the manifold structures of repetition against the backdrop of current explorations of the event's temporality, thus surveying a facet of Koselleck's pioneering work that is too often forgotten.

Keywords: event, Koselleck, metahistory, structures of repetition

In his *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, published in 1578, Jean de Léry described certain "ceremonies that the Tupinamba observe when they receive friends who go to visit them" with the bewilderment, but not the intolerant arrogance, typical of Europeans of the age.² After arriving, Léry explained, the guest is seated in a hammock of sorts, where the village's women surround him. While crouching on the ground, they cover their eyes and, "in this manner, weeping their welcome to the visitor, they will say a thousand things in his praise."³ In his 1997 lecture at the University of Montreal titled "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement," which was later published in *Critical Inquiry* as "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," Jacques Derrida used this sixteenth-century (proto)anthropological description to illuminate the paradoxical status of the event. The rite of welcoming a visitor with

1. Open Access funding enabled and organized by ProjektDEAL.

2. Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, transl. Janet Whatley (1578; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 164.

3. *Ibid.*

tears was, according to Derrida, connected to the fact that the women regarded the “newcomers as revenants, as the ghosts of the dead coming back, and so they were to be greeted as revenants, with tears of mourning.”⁴ Comparing the event to the way that the coming of the guest was treated as a return, Derrida explained:

This does not mean to say that the coming is not new. It is new. The coming is absolutely new. But the novelty of this coming implicates in and of itself the coming back. When I welcome a visitor, when I receive the visitation of an unexpected visitor, it must be a unique experience each and every time for it to be a unique, unpredictable, singular, and irreplaceable event. But at the same time, the repetition of the event must be presupposed There must already be a promise of repetition. . . . [R]epetition must already be at work in the singularity of the event, and with the repetition, the erasure of the first occurrence is already underway—whence loss, mourning, and the posthumous, sealing the first moment of the event, as originary. Mourning is already there. One cannot avoid mixing tears with the smile of hospitality. Death is on the scene, in a way.⁵

Singularity and generality, the unforeseeable and the repeatable, the impossible occurrence and the verbalized recurrence, *arrivant* and *revenant* are the seemingly contradictory terms between which Derrida positioned the event. Derrida’s observations, I believe, may even be relevant to those historians who show no interest in the hauntological status he assigned to the event.⁶ In this article, I take a cue from Derrida insofar as my principal interest is in the “structures of repetition” that characterize supposedly singular events.⁷ My starting point for this analysis of the temporality of the event is Koselleck’s discussion of the event in “Structures of Repetition in Language and History.” Like Derrida, Koselleck conceptualized the event paradoxically: although the protagonists who are engaged in bringing about an event and its historians commonly understand the event as being something unique and unrepeatable (it is a historical singularity that parts time in a before and an after), Koselleck argued that the event is at the same time reliant on structures of repetition.

Departing from a close reading of Koselleck’s foundational text, my article scrutinizes the manifold structures of repetition that seemingly contradict the event’s singularity. Against the backdrop of questions about the event’s temporality, it distinguishes three strata of repetitive structures that underlie the event. With his structures of repetition, Koselleck challenged the historicist conception of a solely linear temporality, which constantly breaks with the past and exalts the new. He juxtaposed this overly simplistic modern understanding of historical time with a more complex synthesis of repetition and innovation: he acknowledged that occurrences are of course singular in time and space, but he

4. Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2007), 453. On the roles of revenants, ghosts, and hauntology for historiography, see Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2017).

5. Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” 453.

6. For an overview of Derrida’s work on the event, see Martin Jay, “Historicism and the Event,” in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman, and Richard I. Cohen (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 143-67.

7. Reinhart Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition in Language and History,” in *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, ed. and transl. Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 158-74. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this essay come from the translation published in *Sediments of Time*.

also suggested that what makes them into events is the recurrence therein of the fundamental structures of human existence, the conflicts they generate, and the concepts whereby they are interpreted.

In what follows, I begin by examining a seemingly trivial “structure of repetition”: the iterative proclamation of the return of the event. Although this dynamic transpires on a plane that may seem more or less incidental to the event’s temporality, the *historiographical* structure of the “return of the event” is relevant in that it hints at a dialectic of repetition and innovation that is inherent to historiography itself. This “return” has been announced so frequently since the 1970s that we are bound to wonder if this revenant ever disappeared. In the second section, I turn my attention to Koselleck’s underappreciated “Structures of Repetition in Language and History.” In so doing, I map out the *metahistorical* “structures of repetition, without which no events would ever come to pass.”⁸ I also show how, why, and to what ends Koselleck’s “structures of repetition” are central to his concept of history, which sought to challenge modernity’s bias toward the new and call attention to the “durable structures that distinguish all human histories regardless of the time period or cultural realms in which we situate them.”⁹ In the third section, I consider the *linguistic* stratum of repetitive structures. Though they are too far-reaching to be dealt with exhaustively here, they cannot be omitted, for not only are they central to the dialectic of singularity and generality (or innovation and repetition) that is characteristic of events, but they also engender the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*) that constitutes the presence of the past. In light of growing interest in Koselleck’s work in both German and Anglophone historiography, and against the backdrop of recent criticism on the event’s temporality, this article systematizes the manifold structures of repetition and calls attention to an under-addressed facet of Koselleck’s pioneering work.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL STRUCTURES OF REPETITION: THE REPEATED RETURN OF THE EVENT

“Wherever we look,” François Dosse wrote, “we see testimony of the return of the event.”¹⁰ After being shunned from serious historiography by François Simiand and the *Annales* school, the event gradually reappeared in the aftermath of 1968 and with the “rise of memory” in the course of the 1970s.¹¹ Indeed, French philosopher and sociologist Edgar Morin announced the “return of the event” in a 1972 article titled “Le retour de l’événement,” which was published in a special issue of *Communications* on the topic of the event.¹² The 1972 special issue also

8. *Ibid.*, 160.

9. *Ibid.*

10. François Dosse, “Historical Event between the Sphinx and the Phoenix,” in *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory*, ed. Marek Tamm (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 27. See also François Dosse, *Renaissance de l’événement: Un défi pour l’historien: Entre sphinx et phénix* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010).

11. Nikolay Koposov, “Events, Proper Names and the Rise of Memory,” in Tamm, *Afterlife of Events*, 44.

12. Edgar Morin, “Le retour de l’événement,” *Communications* 18 (1972), 6-20.

included Pierre Nora's article titled "L'événement monstre," which was revised and republished in 1974 as "Le retour de l'événement."¹³ Nora's reflections on the event were inspired by a perception of its new ubiquity thanks to the proliferation of mass media (and particularly the rise of the television). According to Nora, the new ubiquity of the event had led to a paradoxical situation: whereas historiography "achieved modernity by erasing events from its consciousness, denying their importance, and dissolving them out of the past, a different kind of event has come to haunt us, bringing with it, perhaps, the possibility of a truly contemporary history."¹⁴ Hence, Nora was actually commenting on the contemporary omnipresence of the mediated event, a phenomenon that we ourselves can easily relate to and that is further intensified "by the weight of the past on the present"—that is, by memory, which Nora himself was studying at the time.¹⁵

A quick glance at yesterday's newspapers or at the plethora of recently published books commemorating the anniversaries of relevant so-called events suggests that Nora was correct in observing a significant shift in historical consciousness. The latter is characterized by not only the "weight" or presence of the past but also a mysticism of decadic numbers and the subsequent return of former events through anniversaries. In 2019 we commemorated, among other things, the centennial of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and of the founding of the Bauhaus, the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing, and the fortieth anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. And in 2020 we commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz; celebrated Beethoven's, Hegel's, and Hölderlin's two-hundred-fiftieth birthdays; remembered the fiftieth anniversary of Jimi Hendrix's death and of the breakup of the Beatles; and much more. The event serves not only as a reminder to reflect on the narrative pillars of a society and its mores—as in the case of the remembrance of the Shoah—but also as a lubricant for the media and marketing machinery of today's culture industry.

Since Morin's and Nora's articles, the return of the event has been proclaimed repeatedly. In fact, the return of the event has become a sort of historiographical topos. In 1991, Marshall Sahlins hinted at this repeated return in an article he aptly titled "The Return of the Event, Again."¹⁶ In his groundbreaking 1985 book, *Islands of History*, Sahlins had already presented a "possible theory of history" that sought to transcend the dichotomy between event and structure.¹⁷ Defining the event as "a *relation* between a happening and a structure (or structures),"

13. Pierre Nora, "L'événement monstre," *Communications* 18 (1972), 162-72; Pierre Nora, "Le retour de l'événement," in *Faire de l'histoire: Nouveaux problèmes*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 210-28. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this piece are from Pierre Nora, "The Return of the Event," in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: New Press, 1995), 427-36.

14. Nora, "The Return of the Event," 436.

15. Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*, transl. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 133.

16. Marshall Sahlins, "The Return of the Event, Again: With Reflections on the Beginnings of the Great Fijian War of 1843 to 1855 between the Kingdoms of Bau and Rewa," in *Clio in Oceania: Toward a Historical Anthropology*, ed. Aletta Biersack (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 37-99.

17. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 138. See also William H. Sewall Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially 197-224.

Sahlins was able to show how an occurrence—in this case, Cook’s arrival in Hawaii—caused not only the reproduction of the structures underlying Hawaiian culture but also their transformation, thus becoming an event.¹⁸ In this manner, Sahlins presented an extremely elegant reconciliation of structure and event, which, as he emphasized in “The Return of the Event, Again,” “for a certain anthropology, as for a certain history, . . . could not occupy the same epistemological space.”¹⁹

In 1992, Paul Ricoeur declared yet another return of the return of the event in “Le retour de l’événement.” Ricoeur called his readers’ attention to the fact that the event, whose return Nora had declared in 1974, was a transformed event. What had returned was not the “epistemological scandal,” which the prior generation of historians had banned “to the margins of history,” but instead a “creative element and, as such, a necessary counterpart in the event-structure pair.”²⁰ The event qua “creative element,” according to Ricoeur, was a social construct and a looking glass that allowed historians to perceive underlying social structures, which were being both reproduced and transformed through the event.²¹

Less than a decade later—though shortly before the event of 9/11, which both put an end to the misguided assumptions regarding an end of history and once again renewed interest in the event—it was Jacques Revel’s turn to “return to the event” (as he suggested in his article’s French title). In his 2001 article, which was published in French and German, Revel recapitulated not only the critique of the event from Herodotus and Thucydides to Voltaire and Braudel but also the return of the event since Morin and Nora.²² Revel then turned his attention to Ricoeur’s analysis of the event at the center of Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*—that is, the withdrawal of the Mediterranean from the forefront of history—and traced parallels between Ricoeur’s findings in *Time and Narrative* and Koselleck’s reflections in “Representation, Event, and Structure,” which I will discuss shortly.²³ The event’s return, Revel concluded, was not to be seen as the result of a failure to banish it from “academic historiography” but rather as “an enrichment and consolidation of the discussions regarding the complexity of historical time and

18. Ibid., xiv.

19. Sahlins, “The Return of the Event, Again,” 38-39. Sahlins’s observation is too felicitous to be omitted, as he deemed the “table of oppositions [between event and structure] that could be constructed from Annales texts . . . worthy almost of the cosmological dualisms of certain Amazonian peoples” (“The Return of the Event, Again,” 40).

20. Paul Ricoeur, “Le retour de l’événement,” *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome* 104, no. 1 (1992), 29 (my translation).

21. Koposov, “Events, Proper Names and the Rise of Memory,” 44.

22. Jacques Revel, “Retour sur l’événement: Un itinéraire historiographique,” in *Le goût de l’enquête: Pour Jean-Claude Passeron*, ed. Jean-Louis Fabiani (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), 95-118; Jacques Revel, “Die Wiederkehr des Ereignisses – Ein historiographischer Streifzug,” transl. Erika Mursa, in “Struktur und Ereignis,” ed. Andreas Suter and Manfred Hettling, special issue 19, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (2001), 158-74.

23. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), especially 215; Reinhart Koselleck, “Representation, Event, and Structure,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 105-14.

the historian's possibility of its representation."²⁴ According to Revel, the event reappeared in historiography due to scholars' growing interest in historical temporality, its multiple strata, and its interwovenness with narrative. Before I offer a more detailed discussion of these debates on the event's repetitive structures, I would like to mention a further return of the return of the event, if only for the sake of completeness. Although not as momentous as the prior ones, this last appearance will bring us more or less to the present state of affairs.

To the best of my knowledge, the latest proclamation of the return of the event occurred in Patrick Hutton's 2018 review of Henry Rousso's *The Latest Catastrophe* and Robin Wagner-Pacifici's *What Is an Event?*²⁵ Whereas Rousso's book showed no particular interest in the event in and of itself, Wagner-Pacifici's book called attention to events' temporality and emphasized their "restlessness"—that is, their openness to constant reinterpretation—and the role played by their "sedimentation" after their first occurrence.²⁶ Although this discourse is familiar enough, this latest return to the event seems to be taking place in an altogether different historiographical field, where it risks going unnoticed because it is making its renewed appearance in the disguise of a different term—that is, the "global moment." According to Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, global moments are "events of a popular significance that appealed to people in discrete and distant locations."²⁷ The growing number of studies focusing on a particular year points to the possible return of the (now decidedly synchronous and spatialized) event to the center of historiographical attention and narrative.²⁸

This need not come as a surprise, since the above overview of the repeated return of the event actually seems to indicate that the event was never gone. On the one hand, a wide variety of historians never shared the *Annales* school's, Braudel's, and social history's predilection for structures but rather blithely carried on studying great men and the events these individuals intentionally brought about. On the other hand, as Ricoeur demonstrated in *Time and Narrative*, the event's status as a "variable of the plot" means that it is so deeply entangled with narrative that even its most vehement opponents and advocates of the *longue durée* can't do without some sort of event.²⁹ Although neither the Battle of Lepanto nor the death of Philip II are the crucial events in Braudel's *The Mediterranean and*

24. Revel, "Die Wiederkehr des Ereignisses," 173 (my translation).

25. Patrick Hutton, "The Return of the Event," *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology* 5, no. 1-2 (2018), 218-26.

26. Robin Wagner-Pacifici, *What Is an Event?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 88, 122. According to Wagner-Pacifici, the book itself "was propelled into life by an event"—or, rather, its shadow and ghosts (ix). Indeed, 9/11 has been widely understood as a reminder of how central events are "to the ways we experience life, both individually and collectively" (x).

27. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, "Introduction: Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s," in *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 12. According to Conrad, "a blinkered attention to synchronous constellations has prompted many historians to look at narrow 'moments' and slices of time" (*What is Global History?* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016], 153).

28. Examples of scholarship on a particular year include Frank Bösch's *Zeitenwende 1979: Als Die Welt von Heute Begann* (München: C. H. Beck, 2019) and Erez Manela's *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

29. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:217.

the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, its narrative still revolves around “the retreat of the Mediterranean from general history.”³⁰ And although the latter is not one of those “surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs,” it is an event nonetheless.³¹ Keeping in mind this paradoxical tension between the ubiquity of the event and the perceived need to proclaim its return, I now turn my attention to the metahistorical structures of repetition, which, according to Koselleck’s understanding of history, underlie all events. Like Braudel, one could maintain that these metahistorical structures of repetition are “virtually unsuspected either by . . . [history’s] observers or its participants” and “little touched by the obstinate erosion of time.”³²

KOSELLECK’S METAHISTORICAL STRUCTURES OF REPETITION

Koselleck’s “Structures of Repetition in Language and History,” which was based on a lecture he presented at Freiburg in November 2003, was published in *Saeculum* as “Wiederholungsstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte” shortly after his death in 2006.³³ A shorter version of the article had appeared a year earlier in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* under the title “Was sich wiederholt” (“What Repeats Itself”).³⁴ Whereas Koselleck used an aphorism coined by nineteenth-century German-Jewish author Rahel Varnhagen to launch the concise version, he commenced the longer piece with a humorous quote from the Austrian playwright Johann Nepomuk Nestroy: “The strange thing with all these love stories is that they always revolve around the same thing, but how they start and end is so endlessly different that watching them never gets boring!”³⁵ According to Koselleck, whereas each love that flourishes between two people will always be “endlessly different,” “the same thing is always at stake.”³⁶ Having suggested that “persons . . . and their stories, occurrences, and conflicts as well as their solutions . . . remain unique and unrepeatable on the temporal track of events,” Koselleck introduced his thesis “that these events are predisposed by or contained within self-repeating pregivens, without ever being identical to these.”³⁷ Koselleck thus situated his argument between “two extreme positions,” for “neither constant repetition nor continuous innovation suffices to explain historical change.”³⁸ Koselleck’s aim is far-reaching: “This thought experiment seeks to circumscribe all conceivable singular events of possible histories theoretically in such a way that they be described in temporal terms with the categories in question, and it

30. Ibid.

31. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, transl. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1:21.

32. Ibid., 16.

33. Reinhart Koselleck, “Wiederholungsstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte,” *Saeculum* 57, no. 1 (2006), 1-16.

34. Reinhart Koselleck, “Was sich wiederholt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21 July 2005, 6. See also Willibald Steinmetz, “Nachruf auf Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006),” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 32, no. 3 (2006), 412-32.

35. Johann Nepomuk Nestroy, “Lektüre für Minuten,” in *Gedanken aus seinen Büchern*, ed. Egon Fridell (Frankfurt: Insel, 2001), 42, quoted in Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 158.

36. Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 158.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 170.

likewise aims to uncover the longer-lasting preconditions, that is, the structures of repetition, without which no events would ever come to pass.”³⁹ Before reconsidering Koselleck’s metahistorical categories in more detail, it is necessary to provide at least some context for this comprehensive project. Koselleck’s “historical anthropology,” or rather his metahistory, was deeply rooted in Heideggerian existential philosophy and aimed to overcome an understanding of history that was imbued with *Geschichtsphilosophie*.⁴⁰ Already in his dissertation, which was titled “Kritik und Krise,” Koselleck had argued that these ideological philosophies of history attempted to erase the very substance of history—that is, its contingent outcome.⁴¹ Koselleck’s attempt to develop a different conception of history can be traced back to his first letter to Carl Schmitt, which in retrospect resembles a sort of *Oldest Systematic Program* of Koselleck’s radically historicist project, or his historicization of history and historicism.⁴² In his 21 January 1953 letter to the former “crown jurist of the Third Reich,” Koselleck highlighted the problems that plagued European intellectuals, and especially German ones, following the First World War and during the so-called first crisis of historicism.⁴³ Doing so, Koselleck sketched a way out of the aporetic situation that had arisen from the realization that everything was a product of historical becoming:

Historicism has reached the resigned conclusion that the relativity of all historical events and values must be subjected to total “relativity.” As far as I see, this is the starting point for every analysis of historicity. One should—through this still very historiographical insight—once and for all break through to a historical ontology, which is not merely the latest methodological approach, but the beginning of a conceptualization, which makes it possible to cut the historical philosophy off from its water supply and consequently give an answer to our concrete situation.⁴⁴

39. *Ibid.*, 160.

40. Reinhart Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” in Franzel and Hoffmann, *Sediments of Time*, 45.

41. Reinhart Koselleck, “Kritik und Krise” (PhD diss., University of Heidelberg, 1954). For more on “Kritik und Krise” and the context from which it arose, see Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 4, 51–100. See also *Begriffene Geschichte: Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*, ed. Hans Joas and Peter Vogt (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011); *Zwischen Sprache und Geschichte: Zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*, ed. Carsten Dutt and Reinhard Laube (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013).

42. In using the word “historicism” here, I do not refer to the school of historical thought exemplified by Ranke and his German successors. Rather, I follow Ernst Troeltsch’s use of the term, which has been reinforced by Otto Gerhard Oexle. Here, “historicism” means a fundamentally historical understanding of the world—that is, the idea that everything in the world (as well as our understanding of it) is subject to historical change. For more on this, see Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Studien zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 17–40. On Troeltsch and the crisis of historicism, see Brent W. Sockness, “Historicism and Its Unresolved Problems: Ernst Troeltsch’s Last Word,” in *Historisierung: Begriff – Geschichte – Praxisfelder*, ed. Moritz Baumstark and Robert Forkel (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 210–30.

43. The epithet of “crown jurist of the Third Reich” for Carl Schmitt goes back to the political scientist Waldemar Gurian, “Carl Schmitt, der Kronjurist des III. Reiches,” *Deutsche Briefe* 4 (1934), 52–54. On the crisis of historicism, see Otto Gerhard Oexle, “Krise des Historismus – Krise der Wirklichkeit: Eine Problemgeschichte der Moderne,” in *Krise des Historismus – Krise der Wirklichkeit: Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur 1880–1932*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 11–116.

44. Koselleck to Carl Schmitt, 21 January, 1953, Landesarchiv NRW, Abteilung Rhineland, RW 265-8131/1-2, translation quoted in Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 64. The letter is now available in the recently published correspondence between Koselleck and Schmitt, *Reinhart Koselleck – Carl Schmitt: Der Briefwechsel, 1953–1983*, ed. Jan Eike Dunkhase (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 9–17.

According to Niklas Olsen, Koselleck then went on “to present the foundation of what he called an ‘ontology of history’ by which he meant certain fundamental existential structures of the human condition.”⁴⁵ It’s worth quoting the corresponding passage of the letter, as Koselleck revived these “existential structures” in his 1985 lecture honoring Hans-Georg Gadamer as well as in his last article on the structures of repetition.⁴⁶ Koselleck’s 1953 letter to Schmitt continued: “History is not transcendent for human beings, even though people die, but because it encompasses a finality of human things, which permanently questions the historical space that every human being is assigned to. The teaching of this finality is as eschatology also to be given ontological primacy in all historical sciences.”⁴⁷ Koselleck added that “master and slave, friend and enemy, gender (*Geschlechtlichkeit*) and generation and all geopolitical questions belong to here.”⁴⁸ Over three decades later, Koselleck returned to these categories and proposed a *Historik* of his own, one that went well beyond Droysen’s, as Koselleck’s metahistorical design wasn’t a theory of historiography but a theory of history that encompassed history’s prelinguistic and linguistic conditions of possibility. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* remained Koselleck’s point of departure.⁴⁹ Human historicity—that is, the condition of possibility of historical being—arose from the temporality of *Dasein* and thus from “Being-towards-death.”⁵⁰ Yet Heidegger’s concepts seemed insufficient to Koselleck: “As ‘*Dasein*,’ human beings are not yet open to the fellow humans . . . and not free in their potential for conflict with them.”⁵¹ Therefore, Koselleck proposed five antipodal, categorical pairs “to expand the categorical options on offer.”⁵² First, Koselleck suggested “supplement[ing] Heidegger’s central determination of running toward death with the category of being able to kill.”⁵³ Then, Koselleck added the further tension of “inside and outside” to the oppositional pairing of “friend and enemy,” which he had mentioned in his 1953 letter to Schmitt.⁵⁴ Additionally, whereas he somewhat modified his earlier reference to “gender and generation” by instead using the term “generativity,” he repeated the “master and slave” dynamic with his reference to “above and below.”⁵⁵

How are we to understand these anthropological or metahistorical categories as “conditions of possible events” and “conditions of possible history”?⁵⁶ In what sense do they constitute “structures of repetition, without which no events would ever come to pass”?⁵⁷ Frankly, it seems that Koselleck did not deem it necessary

45. Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 64.

46. See Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics.”

47. Koselleck to Schmitt, 21 January 1953, translation quoted in Olsen, *History in the Plural*, 65.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 44.

50. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 277.

51. Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 44.

52. *Ibid.*, 45.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, 47.

55. *Ibid.*, 50, 51.

56. Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 162; Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 43.

57. Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 160.

to answer these questions explicitly. He had different bones to pick, and so his arguments in both “*Historik* and Hermeneutics” and “Structures of Repetition in Language and History” focused on not only demarcating the pre- or extra-linguistic from the linguistic realm of history but also distinguishing his *Historik* from Gadamer’s hermeneutics. For Koselleck, although history is impossible without language, it isn’t reducible to language because there is a world beyond the text.⁵⁸ Thus, Koselleck never articulated how these structures of repetition actually generate events, but it is clear that he saw them as defining and delineating a field out of which possible histories arise. Change, events, and, most of all, conflicts are constituted by the structural differences or tensions underlying human existence. This becomes clearer in Koselleck’s interview with Carsten Dutt, which was first published in 2001:

The oppositions earlier-later, inside-outside, and above-below . . . are very formal categories, but ones without which history is unthinkable. And once we take this seriously, we can deduce forms of conflict from these categories—conflicts, because these structural refractions lead quite necessarily to temporal and social determinations of difference. In other words: if I have a theory of conflict that can be potentially applied over and over, then I can take into consideration the spark that ignites possible problems, the seed that creates conflicts.⁵⁹

This idea of a theory of history as “a theory of conflict” obviously reflects Koselleck’s experiences in the Third Reich, on the Eastern front, in Soviet captivity, and during the Cold War—that is, his personal life during the age of extremes. Yet how can categories that are so obviously derived from a personal experience of the twentieth century be metahistorical? Given its own historicity—and even though Koselleck sought to overcome this pitfall by insisting that historians must always reflect and historicize their own concepts and historical perspectives—Koselleck’s attempt to devise a metahistory that encompassed and conditioned *all* histories seems more or less doomed to failure. However, if we look beyond the question of the oppositional pairs’ “metahistorical” status, his design reminds us of the fundamental fact that all events are preconditioned by the natural world in which we live, the biological limits and existential tensions of our existence, and thus the structures that have repeated and keep repeating themselves throughout human existence.⁶⁰

Koselleck saw our “being-in-the-world,” and the possible histories and events it generates, as being defined by four dimensions.⁶¹ First, its temporality (or “the tension between earlier and later”⁶²) is itself a product of our temporal finitude

58. In the shorter article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Koselleck wrote: “Yet, the extra-linguistic histories out in the world always contain more or less than language can say about them. And conversely in every discourse, which comes before, during or after a history more or less is said than is or was actually the case” (Koselleck, “Was sich wiederholt,” 6 [my translation]). See also Reinhart Koselleck, “Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History: An Interview with Carsten Dutt,” in Franzel and Hoffmann, *Sediments of Time*, 250-65.

59. Koselleck, “Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History,” 252. See also Reinhart Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” in Franzel and Hoffmann, *Sediments of Time*, 137-57.

60. Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 44. On natural preconditions, see Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 163.

61. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 65.

62. Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 165

(that is, “the necessity of death”) and the corresponding ability to “[shorten] the life of the other” (in other words, to kill).⁶³ Second, Koselleck’s concept of “generativity” is closely linked to the temporality of our being-in-the-world and can be understood as a counterpart to the “ability to kill” insofar as we descend from our biological progenitors and have the ability to procreate and thus be succeeded by subsequent generations.⁶⁴ “Generativity” takes human sexuality into account, but it is also the precondition of generational conflicts.⁶⁵ Third, our being-in-the-world is also defined by its spatiality and thus by the constant creation of boundaries between inside and outside, which starts with our body and its perimeters. And finally, if the fact that “every historical *Dasein* is split up into inner and outer spaces” is translated onto the social sphere of our existence, we arrive at the oppositional pairs of “friend and enemy” as well as of “master and slave” (or “above-below”).⁶⁶ According to Koselleck,

demarcations between inside and outside constitute all animal territories, but they also fulfill the minimal requirement for human needs to differentiate themselves from others in order to becoming or remaining actionable. . . . The hierarchy-producing determinations of above and below—the pecking order, in animal terms—come to be transformed in all human constitutions and organizations even if these aim to secure equality and freedom for all involved.⁶⁷

Koselleck made clear that none of these underlying structures of repetition are sufficient preconditions of events: “There are countless (synchronic) conditions and (diachronic) preconditions that are not reducible to regularities, which motivate, occasion, enable, and limit the concrete actions of agents.”⁶⁸ Yet the unique synchronic conditions of, for example, the French Revolution (that is, the shortage of ammunition of the “newly armed popular militia” formed by the Parisians) and the diachronic preconditions (the bad harvest of 1788, for one) of a singular event should not obscure the fact that a specific singularity presupposes regularities and repetitions.⁶⁹ If we continue to take the Storming of the Bastille as an example, this singularity has “an abundance of predispositions to repetition built into . . . it that reach[es] back centuries,” as it is the product of “conflicts extending out across longer spans of time and over many generations of agents.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, even the specific conflicts among the French monarchy, the nobility, and the commoners can and should be understood, according to Koselleck, as manifestations of recurrent conflicts resulting from the existential tensions of “inside and outside” and “above and below” that characterize all human histories.

As I stated in this article’s introduction, Koselleck’s concept of metahistorical structures of repetition are too far-reaching to be dealt with exhaustively. But

63. Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” 139.

64. Koselleck, “*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 46.

65. *Ibid.*, 50. Koselleck’s explanations of “generativity” as a “zoological pre-given” whereby “the relation between a man and a woman leads to the relational determination between parents and children, that is, between generations,” is obviously a conservative world view, but it remains a fact that every human existence is the product of the fusion of gametes (“*Historik* and Hermeneutics,” 50).

66. *Ibid.*, 47, 51.

67. Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 164.

68. *Ibid.*, 162.

69. William H. Sewell Jr., “Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille,” *Theory and Society* 25 (1996), 849.

70. Koselleck, “Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History,” 257, 256.

before turning from the prelinguistic toward the linguistic structures of repetition, it is again necessary to contextualize Koselleck's metahistorical design. His "conceptual model" can be seen as an attempt to grasp history differently, or rather—to quote Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who himself referred back to Jacob Taubes—"to think history differently, without ceasing to think historically at all."⁷¹ Koselleck was not only trying to rid history of the philosophy of history; he was also trying to devise a history that did not rely on the teleology of progress and modernity's predilection for innovation, or, as Peter Fritzsche aptly phrased it, "the restless iteration of the new so that the past no longer served as a faithful guide to the future."⁷² In Koselleck's eyes, teleological and progressivist history belied the fact that "histories do not . . . end harmoniously, as philosophers of history have time and again alleged, that they do not have diachronic structures of completion, but instead that we can always witness new conflicts."⁷³ A history concentrated on innovation and based solely on the concept of linear time was "insufficient, because every historical sequence contains linear as well as recurrent elements" and thus had to be complemented by a cyclical model—or rather, linear *and* cyclical time, innovation *and* repetition had to be synthesized.⁷⁴ Whereas it never occurred to Koselleck to negate the many innovations that characterized modernity (and not in the least its *neue Zeit*, or "new time"), his structures of repetition call attention to the durable structures that continue to determine human existence.⁷⁵ They also reminded his contemporaries that "only when we know what can repeat itself at any time (though not always all at once) can we ascertain what is truly new in our time."⁷⁶

LINGUISTIC STRUCTURES OF REPETITION

Koselleck classified the metahistorical structures of repetition as pre- or extralinguistic and as synchronic preconditions of possible events, but a short glance must be cast on the diachronic, linguistic structures of repetition.⁷⁷ In what follows, I briefly discuss the ways in which the linguistic structures of repetition present a paradox that cannot be resolved—that is, what Derrida has described as the "impossible possibility of saying the event" and the complex temporality that the "saying of the event" brings forward:

This saying of the event is always somewhat problematical because the structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event. . . . [B]ecause as saying and hence as structure

71. Koselleck, "Structures of Repetition," 160; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Posthistoire Now," in *Präsenz*, ed. Jürgen Klein (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2012), 24 (my translation).

72. Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

73. Koselleck, "Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History," 252.

74. Reinhart Koselleck, "Sediments of Time," in Franzel and Hoffmann, *Sediments of Time*, 3.

75. On modernity's *neue Zeit* ("new time"), see Reinhart Koselleck, "Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement," in *Futures Past*, 224.

76. Reinhart Koselleck, "Constancy and Change of All Contemporary Histories: Conceptual-Historical Notes," in Franzel and Hoffmann, *Sediments of Time*, 116.

77. Koselleck of course acknowledged that his oppositional pairs "are grasped in language and are socially transformed or politically regulated in and through language. . . . However, these elemental pre-givens deducible from nature remain in effect, and all language seeks in vain to come to terms with them" ("Linguistic Change and the History of Events," 140).

of language, it is bound to a measure of generality, iterability, and repeatability, it always misses the singularity of the event. One of the characteristics of the event is that not only does it come about as something unforeseeable, not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular. On the contrary, the saying of the event or the saying of knowledge regarding the event lacks, in a certain manner a priori, the event's singularity simply because it comes after and it loses the singularity in generality.⁷⁸

Why should the saying of the event be more problematic than the saying of anything else? Signs necessarily generalize; signified objects are unique. For both Derrida and Koselleck, the problem of saying the event arises from the fact that events "presuppose or generate their own singularity or even uniqueness," whereas language and concepts rely on repeatability.⁷⁹ In "Representation, Event, and Structure"—an article that goes back to the 1970 meeting of the Poetik und Hermeneutik research group—Koselleck stated:

No event can be narrated, no structure represented, no process described without the use of historical concepts which make the past "conceivable." But this conceptual quality goes further than the singularity of the past which it helps to conceptualize. Linguistically, the categories employed to recount the unique event cannot claim the same uniqueness as the event in question. That is on the face of it a triviality. But it must be repeated to make clear the structural claim which arises on the basis of the unavoidable use of historical concepts.⁸⁰

For Koselleck, concepts help lay bare relations between the occurrence and its representation as an event, between the event's protagonists and its subsequent describers, between the event and the structures that precede it (and the effects that follow it), and between diverging time tiers of the underlying structures, the events themselves, and their historical description. Koselleck explained: "Concepts not only teach us of the singularity (for us) of past meanings, but also contain structural potential, dealing with the contemporaneous in the noncontemporary."⁸¹ For Koselleck, language's structures of repetition—for example, the application of general concepts in use today to describe long-gone events—are "conditions of possible histories": "Only concepts with a claim to

78. Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," 446.

79. Koselleck, "Structures of Repetition," 168.

80. Koselleck, "Representation, Event, and Structure," 112. In 1970, the annual meeting of the Poetik und Hermeneutik research group revolved around the topic of history and histories. Koselleck's interests in the specificity of modern historical consciousness and temporality, the formation of the "collective singular" history during the "saddle time," and the constitutive role of language in historiography defined the research agenda and debates of that year's workshop. In Koselleck's work, "saddle time" refers roughly to the years between 1750 and 1850 in which the modern world was born, "new time" developed, and the semantics of modern concepts were established ("Einleitung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck [Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972], xv [my translation]). For more on the "collective singular," see Reinhart Koselleck, Christian Meier, Odilo Engels, and Horst Günther, "Geschichte, Historie," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 2, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1975), 647. See also Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel, forward to *Geschichte: Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich: Fink, 1973), 7-8. For more on the Poetik und Hermeneutik research group's role as the epicenter of Germany's postwar intellectual history, see Jürgen Kaube, "Zentrum der intellektuellen Nachkriegsgeschichte," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 June 2003, 46.

81. Ibid.

durability, repeated applicability, and empirical realizability—concepts with a structural content—open the way today for a formerly ‘real’ history to appear possible and to be represented as such.”⁸²

But durable concepts are not only central to understanding and representing an event *ex post*; they also, according to Koselleck, precondition events *in actu*. Koselleck’s reasoning in regard to the linguistic structures of repetition that precede the event can be traced back to Gadamer’s (and Heidegger’s) concept of the “fore-structure of understanding” (*Vorstruktur des Verstehens*).⁸³ In his article “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” which was first published in *Merkur* in 1989, Koselleck wrote: “Spoken language is always either more or less than what is realized in the actual course of history. Language adjudicates above all as to the possibility of a history *in actu*. . . . Concepts [*Begriffe*] become pre-conceptions [*Vorgriffe*].”⁸⁴ For Koselleck, these “preconceptions” are therefore actually predictions in the literal sense—that is, they are instances in which the thinking or saying of the event before the event takes place conditions the event’s occurrence. Accordingly, he explained:

Language anticipates possible events, which under different circumstances, may, but need not recur. As a storehouse of experiences, language bundles together the conditions of possible events. . . . [T]he linguistic repeatabilities and the irrevocable sequence of events describe temporal structures that can be distinguished from one another, even if both inseparably influence each other in everyday life.⁸⁵

Semantics and events are subject to a varying “tempo of change.”⁸⁶ Since the end of the eighteenth century, the meaning of the word “revolution” (to name but one example from the “saddle time” Koselleck focused on) has remained relatively stable. Even so, each revolution—be it the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, or the Fascist Revolution in Italy—triggered a sequence of events that resulted in rapid changes in societal structures and institutions. Revolutionary events seem to follow a “script” of sorts, as Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein have suggested.⁸⁷ And it is not in the least the term “revolution” that contains this “script,” or rather what Koselleck called the “structures of possible action.”⁸⁸ It seems worthwhile to consider if other types of events aren’t likewise characterized by this kind of “script” or, better, by *topoi*, which

82. *Ibid.*

83. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 192; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2006), especially 268-73. Koselleck explained: “It is impossible to understand a spoken or written sentence that does not have recourse to what is linguistically known ahead of time, to ‘pre-understanding’ in Gadamer’s sense. Even novelties, that is, something newly recognized or discovered, can only be turned into knowledge if language as transmitted allows for them to be expressed” (Koselleck, “Structures of Repetition,” 171).

84. Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” 142.

85. *Ibid.*, 145. On the relation between experience and anticipation, see also Theo Jung, “Events Getting Ahead of Themselves: Rethinking the Temporality of Expectations,” *History and Theory* 60, no. 1 (2021), 117-33.

86. *Ibid.*

87. Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, introduction to *Scripting Revolution: A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions*, ed. Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2. See also Anna Karla, “Controversial Chronologies: The Temporal Demarcation of Historic Events,” *History and Theory* 60, no. 1 (2021), 134-49.

88. Koselleck, “Linguistic Change and the History of Events,” 144.

protagonists have to actualize and both contemporary and retrospective observers have to recognize in order for an occurrence to become an event. Yet such considerations regarding a typology and a respective topics (in the Aristotelean sense) of events go beyond the scope of the present contribution and thus must be set aside for later consideration.

As has become clear, Koselleck—not unlike Marx in his frequently quoted first chapter in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*—understood that historical innovations are reliant on linguistic structures of repetition. Indeed, Marx wrote:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please. . . . And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.⁸⁹

According to Koselleck, however, it is not only old names, battle cries, costumes, or concepts that return to prescribe and describe new events; it is a wide variety of experiences, too.⁹⁰ It is no wonder that Koselleck began his 2005 piece in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* by quoting Rahel Varnhagen's observation that "we do not have new experiences: it is always new people who have old experiences."⁹¹ Koselleck understood his metahistorical structures of repetition as the existential differences that define our temporal, spatial, and social "being-in-the-world" and thus as the conditions of possibility of events and histories. As Koselleck made clear, a "structure of repetition has little or nothing to do with the traditional doctrine of cyclical return."⁹² Obviously, Koselleck denied neither the radical transformation of the world nor the hitherto unforeseeable destruction of human lives, which he and his contemporaries had experienced firsthand. His oppositional pairs were an attempt to ground these experiences in a historical anthropology of human existence. Furthermore, his design of an alternative *Historik* was aimed against modernity's chronocentrism. He elaborated the "longer-lasting preconditions, that is, the structures of repetition, without which no events would ever come to pass" in the hope that they would "allow us to distinguish between what in our so-called *Neuzeit* (modernity) is really new—that is, repeats nothing of what was earlier the case—and what was actually there previously and has returned in new form."⁹³ It seems that Koselleck, not unlike Derrida, also understood "newcomers as revenants, as the ghosts of the dead coming back."⁹⁴ From the historiographical return of the return of the event, through the return of conflicts, (hi)stories, and experiences expressed in events, and all the way to the return of concepts briefly hinted at above, the event has

89. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 11 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 103.

90. Koselleck declared: "Many experiences had by the ancients are repeatable, perhaps many more than we moderns would have it" ("Linguistic Change and the History of Events," 157).

91. Koselleck, "Was sich wiederholt," 6 (my translation).

92. Koselleck, "Structures of Repetition," 161.

93. *Ibid.*, 160.

94. Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," 453.

become a revenant of sorts. Koselleck's works lack the sound, and maybe also the appeal, that is characteristic of Derrida's texts: it appears as if there were "no ghosts here," but only *Geist*.⁹⁵ His doubts regarding historicist temporality were no less fundamental, and they impelled him "to think history differently, without ceasing to think historically at all."⁹⁶

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95. Kleinberg, *Haunting History*, 137.

96. Gumbrecht, "Posthistoire Now," 24 (my translation).