Linguistic Change and the History of Events*

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"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words (or names) will never hurt me." Like all sayings, this one contains an evident truth. Anyone who has been struck knows from experience that something more has taken place than language can accomplish. But, like all sayings, this one gives us only a partial truth—for it might be verbal aggression that causes one to resort to "sticks and stones." Words, too, can destroy. Herodotus relates that the mere reading of Darius's letters was sufficient to incite Oroites's bodyguards to murder the very man they were supposed to protect, Oroites himself.¹

Concerning the relationship between history and language, we can at any rate draw from these observations the following conclusion: history in the actual course of its occurrence has a different mode of being from that of the language spoken about it (whether before, after, or concomitant with the events). The current methodological debate about intellectual history tends to relativize the sharp antitheses between reality and thought, being and consciousness, history and language.² In their place weaker antitheses are employed, ones whose terms can more easily be brought into relation to one another, as for instance "meaning and experience," where the terms mutually condition or elucidate one another, or "text and context," behind which both linguistic and nonlinguistic conditions are hidden. The sociology of knowledge and linguistic analysis converge, so to speak, when "meaning" and "experience" are set in relation to one another. I do not wish to contest the justification of such a methodological procedure. All language is historically conditioned, and all history is linguistically conditioned. Who would want to deny that all the concrete experiences we have only become experiences through the mediation of language? It is just this which makes history possible. But at the same time I do want to insist

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¹ Herodotus, History 3.128.

that language and history be kept separate analytically, because neither one can be related in its entirety to the other. Between language and action—and, one might also say, between language and passion—there remains a difference, even if language is an act of speech, and even if action and passion are mediated by language. It is this difference, then, with which this paper will be concerned.

I shall proceed in three steps. First, I want to call attention to some pre- and extralinguistic conditions of human history. Second, I want to describe in outline the relation between language and history in the process of coming-into-being of the events, of the happenings themselves. And, third, I want to sketch out the relation between language and history ex post, that is, after the uniquely experienced event and its context.

I. THE PRELINGUISTIC CONDITIONS OF HUMAN HISTORY

There are numerous natural givens, be they geographical, biological, or zoological, that mankind has in common with the animals but that also make history possible. Historical anthropology has to be concerned with these givens, which thrust their way, like quasi-natural conditions, into the realm of history. We might call these conditions, which mankind shares with the animals and which are to that extent pre- and extralinguistic, “metahistorical.” I want to discuss three such metahistorical conditions of all possible histories.

In the first place there is the span of time between birth and death which men have in common with animals. In conjunction with this there is the bipolarity of the sexes and generativity, without which there would be no succession of generations. For mankind the span of time between birth and death is a condition of finitude that both makes history possible and calls it forth. The succession of generations leads to the existence of a plurality of experiential spaces that overlap each other and, like different strata, are distinct from each other and exclude one another. This forms the basis for diachronic conflicts, which cannot be mediated without institutional rules and

regulations. The tension between "earlier" and "later"—and, indeed, the very notions of "too soon" and "too late," which are fundamental for all history—is based upon just these natural givens of generativity, birth, and death. And it is death which, as we know all too well, mankind is capable of forcefully preempts—in order, supposedly, to obtain better control over history. It is not just the necessity of death, which with proper care can be delayed, but also the ability to kill, by which we shorten another's life span, which belong to the naturally conditioned, anthropological givens of numerous histories with which we are familiar.

Second, man shares with the animals the ever significant difference between inner and outer. No unit of human social activity ever comes into being without being able to delimit itself inwardly and outwardly. In this formal opposition, too, lie the seeds of various potential histories. Whether it be the embattled retreat into a cave, or the forcible enclosure of a house; whether it be the drawing of a border that occasions, or concludes, a conflict, or the rites of initiation; whether we are talking about grants of asylum, or secret societies, or the examination systems and admissions qualifications that create modern social entities, or membership in a political community into which one normally is born—in all these cases the difference between "inner" and "outer" remains fundamental for the conflicts that arise and for their resolutions, fundamental, in short, for the histories with which we are all familiar. This remains true even today when the increased complexity of the various domestic and foreign domains that overlap and interpenetrate one another has made the comprehension of world history enormously more difficult.

There is a third kind of differentiation that man shares with his zoological relatives; the pecking order, or, in classical terms, the hierarchy of master and slave. Formally this is the opposition between "above" and "below." The political art of organizing communities may set up rules of procedure that aim at making "above" and "below" interchangeable and, to that extent, at equality; or it may seek to subject the lines of authority to a consensual process and, to that extent, to secure freedom. But that makes no difference with regard to the formal given of a necessary relation between "above" and "below." Nor can the supposed transformation of personal rule into anonymous administration, that is, the functional differentiation of our society, abolish the functional existence of relations of "above" and "below."

To sum up: "earlier/later," "inner/outer," and "above/below" are three sets of contraries without which no history can come to be, regardless of the forms they take on in particular cases—economic or religious, political or social, or something involving all these empirical factors. This sketch is simplistic, of course, but it should serve to confirm my first argument, namely, that language and history cannot be related to each other in their
entirety. The pairs of formal oppositions that I have named condition, prelinguistically, all concrete histories. Naturally, all of these formal pairs, which man shares with the animals—birth and death, generativity, inner and outer delimitation, orientation above and below—are grasped by man linguistically. By means of language they are reshaped socially or regulated politically. There is no acting human community that does not determine itself linguistically. It is almost always membership in a certain linguistic community that determines whether one is included or excluded. It is almost always the capacity to master certain modes of speech or specialized languages that decides whether one will move higher or lower, up or down, in a society. Almost always there are linguistic norms that are generation-specific and that sort out, diachronically, the experiences and hopes of the old from those of the young. Man, as a linguistic being, simply cannot avoid transforming the metahistorical givens linguistically in order to regulate and direct them, so far as he can. Nevertheless, these elementary, natural givens remain, however much language may seek to efface them. The things which, in the framework of the givens I have named, have gathered themselves up into reality are more than can be mastered by language.

When the fluctuating distinction between "inner" and "outer" hardens into the passionate conflict between friend and foe, when the inevitability of death is preempted by killing or by self-sacrifice, when the relation between "above" and "below" leads to enslavement and permanent subjugation or to exploitation and class struggle, or when the tension between the sexes leads to degradation—in all these cases there will then occur events, or chains of events, or even cataracts of events, which are beyond the pale of language, and to which all words, all sentences, all speech can only react. There are events for which words fail us, which leave us dumb, and to which, perhaps, we can only react with silence. We need only recall the speechlessness of the Germans in 1945 when they were confronted with the catastrophe into which they had drawn such countless numbers of individuals and peoples. And every attempt to find a language adequate to mass extermination has up until now been a failure. For those who were the victims, for the event itself, every effort to stabilize memory through language comes too late. It is this difference between history in the actual process of its occurrence and history in its linguistic elaboration that remains, in any case, fundamental for their relationship.

The argument up to now has sought to show how language is never identical with the series of events, how it can be viewed as reacting to events, and, finally, how language's reaction to events is inadequate. When this problem is considered more from the point of view of language than from that of the historical process this difference remains decisive, but it appears as a difference between language taken as a medium that preexists events and
language taken as a spoken or written discourse that actually helps to bring about events. With that, I come to my second point.

II. SPOKEN DISCOURSE, ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION, AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF EVENTS

"There are some things which cannot be explained in words, but only in actions. Other things can be explained in words, but no exemplary deed emerges from them." 4 This shrewd distinction was made by Herodotus. He put it into the mouth of Darius during the celebrated debate about the succession in Persia, whose outcome was still fully undecided. There are few episodes of discourse in world history that have been cited so often as this debate about the best constitution. At that time, the issue was decided in favor of monarchy and against either aristocracy or democracy by means of arguments which at that time were, if not better, at any rate stronger.

We need not be concerned here with the critical-philological question as to whether or not the debate about the constitution is an insertion, for sophistical reasons, by Herodotus—whether the arguments are imaginary and only inserted into the mouths of the Persians or whether the open and disputed succession actually evoked these or similar arguments (a version that has much to recommend it). 5 Herodotus has in any event accomplished one thing: he has portrayed the prior linguistic achievement, the practical concepts, that preceded a particular political act—in this case, the selection of Darius as king. In other words, he has called our attention in a methodologically deliberate way to the tension that prevails between spoken discourse and its chain of consequences. The participants in the debate have formulated their experiences of possible forms of political organization in their concepts. In so doing, they have formulated not only unique but also structural alternatives. Put differently, they have been speaking about more desirable or less desirable histories, about possible histories, and not yet about the actual history which then, uniquely and determinately, occurred.

With this we have, thanks to Herodotus, one initial result: spoken discourse is always both more and less than is carried out in the actual course of history. It is language above all that decides about the potentialities of history in actu. Its temporal structure is therefore different from that of the event sequence. This is also clear if we consider the later history of this text. It thematizes the possibilities of a political constitution in a unique situation, but it also contains a prognostic potential that is applicable beyond the particular situation that gave rise to it. Insofar as a situation is discussed in

4 Herodotus, History 3.72.
which the decision is still open, arguments are brought forward from experience that claim a more universal validity (as is also true, mutatis mutandis, for the debates Herodotus introduces before the outbreak of every war). The advantages of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy are weighed against one another. The arguments themselves are not exhausted by the situation to which they are related. They can be transferred and repeated. The numerous eighteenth-century prognoses of revolution that predicted the events of 1789 and after—not in detail, but structurally—are proof of this.

Such predictions are numerous, in part deriving from the desirability of a single, total transformation of all previous history, in part based on previous historical experience stored up in written or printed language. Apart from the empirical arguments in the prognoses—the analysis of conditions in France, the predicted parallels to the English Revolution together with the trial of the king and the ominous figure of Cromwell, the texts of Tacitus, Sallust, Polybius, and Thucydides—one element emerges continually throughout all the time periods appealed to, and that is the typology of constitutions formulated for the first time by Herodotus. And here what was of interest was above all the immanent course of events, just as Darius, the eventual winner of the debate, had already predicted. Darius had supported monarchy with the following argument: every democracy leads to bloody factionalism, whose leaders then unite to form an aristocracy; but competition among the aristocrats leads to the emergence of the single strongest individual; therefore one might as well institute a monarchy right at the beginning and be spared this bloody, roundabout path. It is precisely this interpretive scheme that emerges in the eighteenth-century authors. One of the most realistic prognoses of the approaching revolution was penned by Frederick the Great, the shrewdest and most thorough by Diderot. Both authors envision the revolution as a civil war in the course of which the existing monarchies would indeed be overthrown; according to Diderot it would end with the dictatorship of a single strongman, to whom the factious citizenry, intoxicated with its freedom, would voluntarily submit. Wieland, one of the best students of the ancient texts, even predicted Napoleon’s coup a year and a half before the event.6

It is a characteristic feature of the argumentation scheme of Herodotus and of the prognoses based implicitly on his remarks that language had brought together into concepts principles of experience that were supposed to influence political activity before its occurrence. We are dealing here with diagnoses put forward with a prognostic, and thus also a pragmatic, intention

in order to influence a future whose details may be unknown but whose historical potentials are recognizable. It was Herodotus who first set out the conflict situations immanent in the various constitutions and their various alternative courses of action—a kind of basic typology of the patterns of human organization and the dangers inherent in them. Only language communicates this kind of information, through all its further transformations and differentiations, so that it can be used again.

It is one of the unique achievements of Thucydides that he elevated this tension between speech and action to the central methodological axis of his history. All of his—admittedly invented—speeches and dialogues are conceived in such a way that, corresponding to the actual situation of the parties involved, they are spoken with respect to a future that is still unknown. Even more than Herodotus, Thucydides has thematized the contradiction that breaks out again and again between actual history and what is said about history, before, during, and after it. Even more, he has shown us that this contradiction is in fact constitutive of the experience of history in general. Communicating this was his methodological achievement, in that he brought the actual events, which he reports diachronically, into the realm of discourse in the speeches of the participants about potential courses of action. Nowadays we would say that the speeches and dialogues contain the theory of the then current history. But Thucydides has not developed the theoretical premises abstractly or generally; rather he has developed them as the concrete principles of action of the conflicting parties. That is, he has thematized the linguistic achievement that precedes history in actu. He has shown us how arguments can change the situation and, at the same time, how they can misinterpret the situation. The oft-noted endurance of the political doctrines that Thucydides tried to set forth is due, methodologically speaking, to the reflected tension that prevails between speech and action, between logoi and erga, but also to that between speech and intention, between unspoken reasons and proffered pretexts—in short, to the tension between language and historical reality, which in this way, and not otherwise, constitutes history.

We need only recall the Melian dialogue, which formulates what we would nowadays call alternative if/then statements, conditional prognostications. By confusing their juridically based hopes with the impending reality, the Melians brought upon themselves a death that they did not foresee. The Athenians referred frankly to their power, which they then brutally applied, and to which initially the Melians might still have submitted. What really happened Thucydides goes on to describe in three sentences. The Melians were executed, their women and children sold into slavery. Language is no

longer capable of taking in the event itself, nor could the dialogue anticipate what really happened. But it could show what structures of possible action were contained in the discourse. Once more it is these structures that can be called upon again in speech, which can be applied analogically, and which are therefore repeatable.

Hacha in Berlin, in 1939, and Dubcek in Moscow, in 1968, were aware of this as they found themselves prepared to submit. They were willing to take upon themselves the burdens that follow from the conflict between might and right. Those burdens the Melians had sought to evade—at the price of their death, as it was to turn out. Whenever you say something, your statement acquires a separate existence, outside you: it has become an event.

Certainly the empirical conditions in Melos, in Berlin, and in Moscow were entirely different. In each case there were different political, social, economic, and ideological presuppositions. But the alternatives that language had preformulated, between which one had to choose, were analogous, even if twenty-five centuries lay between them. Of course, from the perspective of the sequence of events, all speech-acts are also unique and irrevocable. The Athenian decision to attack Melos was so, as were the orders from Berlin and Moscow to occupy Prague. How often in history would one gladly take back a word after it has been uttered because it has changed the situation irrevocably. Herodotus and Thucydides have shown us with unrelenting clarity that spoken discourse contains more than can be discerned at the unique moment of its utterance. They have shown us that in particular alternative courses of action, potential structures emerge which can be invoked again later, and which, to that extent, are not unique but repeatable.

Thus we are dealing with different levels of reality, on one of which the irrevocable succession of events takes place, while on the other language anticipates possible events which, under different conditions, may, but need not, recur. It bundles together, as a storehouse of experience, the conditions of possible events. How many histories are there that never occurred because they were prevented or averted? Such histories, like the preventive war against France that Bismarck averted in 1875, can only be grasped as linguistically transmitted alternatives, whose bloody potentiality was later, in 1914, to be actualized, with consequences that no one wanted and no one had foreseen.

One conclusion therefore emerges from the difference we have been describing: the repeatability of the linguistic phenomena and the uniqueness of the sequence of events are what characterize the two temporal structures, even if in everyday experience the two structures are indistinguishable in their mutual interaction. The slower rate of change of semantic structures and their greater durability allows them to reappear at different temporal moments,
during different historical events, "repeatably," as though they were static. This will be discussed in more detail in what follows.

Every language is an enormous achievement of abstraction. As John Stuart Mill put it: "Mankind have [sic] many ideas, and but few words." The number of words is limited whereas the contents that can be expressed by them—ideas, people, objects, possibilities, realities—are potentially unlimited. Syntax and semantics, too, are limited—hence their enduring stability. To that extent, the repeatability of experiential propositions that have been formulated at one time or other in history, such as we have encountered in Herodotus and Thucydides, is contained in the greater durability of such statements. They can outlast the events that occasioned them and that have become a part of history. And when new experiences become, as it were, a part of language's inventory, as in the case of the centuries-old but ever more nuanced debate about the constitutions, or in the perennially recurring conflict between different notions of might and right, then semantics has a slower rate of change than the events themselves. The linguistic formulation of a uniquely grasped experience prevents it from undergoing the radical alteration that we are familiar with in the history of events.

This thesis can be corroborated if we direct our attention to some concrete speech acts in specific languages. It then becomes clear that language does not simply store experiences that outlast the specific situation: we realize that particular languages delimit these very experiences. As a consequence of their own concreteness, these languages allow experiences to be formulated only in certain ways and not otherwise.

Let's take a comparative example, the debate over voting rights which has been carried on since the French Revolution in Great Britain, France, and Germany and which, in terms of concrete history, can doubtless be seen as part of the common process of democratization. But this so-called trend takes place linguistically in very different temporal rhythms.

In France we find the handy contrast between citoyen and bourgeois, which has served to structure the political discussion ever since its introduction by Diderot in the Encyclopédie. Whoever appealed to the priority of property, as in the election ordinances of 1795, 1816, and 1830, was exposed, semantically, to the suspicion of representing only bourgeois interests rather than the

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9 H. Ryffel, Metabole politeion, Der Wandel der Staatsverfassungen (Bern, 1949).
10 I am here drawing upon a research project currently in progress in Bielefeld that compares the forms of address, the lexicography of the bourgeoisie, and the arguments over the franchise in Germany, England, and France.
universal civil rights that, since the revolution, were supposed to be possessed by everyone. In this respect Bonapartists and radical Republicans were of one mind, and each based their constitutions on a universal right to vote.

In Germany the debate was semantically preprogrammed in a completely different manner. Here there were only Bürger, but that status was determined by one's social order. In common parlance that meant the Stadtbürger (the townsman)—in contrast to the peasantry and the nobility. Toward the close of the Enlightenment the artificial term Staatsbürger ("countryman" in the sense of "fellow-citizen") was coined in analogy to citoyen, but this term never made it into everyday political speech. There followed a further differentiation of the same basic term into the Kleinbürger (the "petty bourgeois"), the Grossbürger, and the Spiessbürger (the Philistine). But as a result the term Bürger lost the theoretical clarity and the political force that the term citoyen possessed. The German debate about voting rights—prior to 1848—got tangled up with property interests and class privileges, which, moreover, were completely different from region to region.

The British Parliament was able to unite these three factors pragmatically. Without having recourse to universal civil rights in the French sense, the debate proceeded along two lines. Within the context of the traditional franchises, which went back to medieval times, the number of privileged freemen, burgesses, orburghers was increased; this was carried out to a different extent in each electoral district (or "borough") and region. The tradition of the concrete and particular determination of rights was preserved, but the justification was modern, innovative. It was a matter of including the previously unrepresented interests of the new middle classes in the community of discourse of Parliament—and that was accomplished.

What does a comparison of these examples show? One and the same movement, if it is viewed extralinguistically—namely, the so-called trend toward democratization, the growing participation of an increasing number of groups in the process of legislation and in the exercise of political power—has been mastered in completely different ways by each of the different languages. Or perhaps one might better say: the trend toward democratization has been induced linguistically in fundamentally different ways.

In France we have a debate about Enlightenment principles whose leitmotiv was a dualistic and polemical opposition between the privileges of the estates and the equality of citizens. These concepts were able to establish themselves in a universal and lasting way during the revolution. The same arguments were used in Germany, but they could not be clearly derived from the term Bürger because that term itself was ambiguous. The term Bürger remained a multivalent one because it was storing up social and class realities that reached far back in time. In Britain, finally, precisely these traditional juridical distinctions were preserved, while being enriched in an innovative way that
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permitted the interests of the middle classes to be represented in the political arena—but nothing further.

What follows from this for our question about the relation between language and history? The concrete concepts around which the political debate turned were bound to the historical experiences that had made their way, at one time or another, into these concepts. Put differently, in each specific discursive situation the greater durability that language in general possesses (our first argument) reveals distinct deep structures which are temporally stratified.

In France the platform of revolutionary language, victorious after 1789, rapidly and effectively rendered the privileges of the estates incapable of legitimation. This was precisely the semantic given that gave rise to so much uncertainty in the debate over voting rights in Germany. The term Bürger vacillated between older social and class references, on the one hand, and civic postulates, on the other; it was not easy to find a common denominator for the two. In Britain the problem was resolved pragmatically. Civil rights were not mentioned. Recourse was had rather to the centuries-old legal force of concepts relating to the townships and the electoral districts, which were at the same time overhauled with a sociological terminology that allowed the new experiences of industrial society to be formulated in new concepts, namely, the "interests of the middle classes."

Thus the arsenal of terms utilized within any synchronously employed language contained given that were diachronically stratified in different ways and that served both to develop and to limit the stock of arguments. The terms employed had a diachronic thrust that could not be fully or freely controlled by the speakers. Consequently, concepts have an internal temporal structure that differs from that of the events that they help to bring about and that they are supposed to comprehend.

This result is also true of our modern concepts of movement that, since the eighteenth century, have attuned our entire linguistic inventory to the idea of the necessity of change, to alteration, and to intentional transformation. The central concepts are improvement, development, progress, history itself, reform, crisis, evolution, and even revolution. Now it is precisely these concepts that, purely semantically, exercise a particularly stabilizing effect. They produce a certain linguistic unity in all political camps, even while there is argument about particulars. Since the French Revolution, and even more against the background of the industrial revolution, it has become increasingly difficult to defend the status quo as such. And even the reactionaries have never dared to assert that they were reactionary. A certain minimum thrust toward change has been accepted by all political camps. Semantically, the concepts of movement allowed no choice. It was only the question of whether to resist, accept, or anticipate the impulse toward change that separated the positions.
Thus, for example, both the radical left Hegelian Arnold Ruge and the Catholic conservative Franz von Baader argued in terms of the unavoidable alternative, "reform or revolution." Both men wanted to prevent a bloody revolution by means of reforms; their only dispute was about the extent of the reforms necessary in order to prevent a revolution. Their argument concerned the direction and the pace of change; the necessity of change was universally presupposed in the conceptual network of the concepts of movement.

Even when the modern concepts of movement point to or impel constant change, the concepts themselves, specific to this epoch, are of extraordinary constancy and are capable of repeated application, even in cases where, in practice, they help to ground completely different programs of action.

Our thesis, that language changes more slowly than does the chain of events that it helps to set in motion and that it seeks to comprehend, can also be sustained for the modern period with its accelerated rate of change, just as it was for the long period of time between Herodotus and Diderot, which was our original point of reference.

Admittedly there are always counter-examples of spontaneous linguistic innovation that for linguistic history have the character of events, cases where the pragmatic usage was strong enough to evade the long-term givens of semantics. The application of the doctrine of interests to the new, so-called, middle classes was already mentioned, as was Diderot's creation of the conceptual pair citoyen/bourgeois, which was to be so conducive to action and which was to place the bourgeois under constant ideological suspicion. Both innovations had substantial, but also stabilizing, consequences. We need mention only one typical example for this, drawn from the German experience.

Bund (union) is a basic concept in German. It was coined in the later middle ages and since then has served as a structural feature of German constitutional history, whereby the latter can still be clearly distinguished from the history of neighboring states. Luther employed this political term in order to translate berith from the Old Testament. This had theological, and for that reason political, consequences as well.

A union, according to this doctrine, could only be initiated by God. It was something outside the realm of human power. With that the term Bund disappeared from the vocabulary of political Protestantism, which was taking shape in accordance with imperial law. What is today known as the

Schmalkald *Bund* never called itself that. The demands for political autonomy that were derived from the religious reformation remained restricted to the rulers and cities enjoying imperial privileges that were united in leagues and unions. Political autonomy was denied to the faithful as members of God’s covenant. The theological concept *Bund* remained restricted to the realm of pure religion, which was quite in contrast to the English term “covenant,” whose religious and political meanings mutually reinforced each other in order to legitimate the revolution of 1640.

The diachronic thrust of Luther’s antipolitical, theological concept of *Bund* lasted a long time. We can identify one end point. In 1847 Marx and Engels were called upon to write a “Catechism of the Union (*Bund*) of Communists.” The specifically German, as well as theological, implications are unmistakable. And thus Marx and Engels decided upon a radically new formulation. Instead of a “Catechism of the Union (*Bund*) of Communists” they wrote the “Manifesto of the Communist Party.” It was an act of deliberate linguistic politics, innovative and of lasting significance. The authors avoided the diachronic semantic thrust of the theological term *Bund* (even though their manifesto remained in large degree a catechism) and made use of the concept of “party,” which was just then beginning to have revolutionary and positive significance. They sought to emphasize this trend, and in that they were, over time, not unsuccessful.

Thus even semantic innovations that are demonstrably unique confirm our thesis that linguistic change occurs more slowly and over different intervals than does the sequence of concrete events that language helps to call forth. Luther’s antirevolutionary, theological concept of *Bund* and Marx’s abandonment of the term in favor of the revolutionary term “party” served first to disclose, then to define, and finally, over time, to stabilize new experiences.

**III. HISTORY AFTER THE EVENTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Up until now we have been examining the relationship between language and history from the perspective of impending events, that is, with respect to history *in actu*. Now let us cast a glance backward. What does language accomplish retrospectively in order to produce or to constitute a history *ex eventu*—out of a sequence of events? The term “history” is here taken in its original sense, according to Greek and Latin usage, not in the sense of the res gestae but rather in that of researched, or narrated, or portrayed history: as “historia,” whose subject matter is the res gestae. Thus we are now dealing with the language of the historian in the narrower sense.

Every historical portrayal represents a selection from the potentially limitless field of things endured or enacted in the past. And it is by no means
language alone that conditions this selection. All selection is already structured prelinguistically, for here, too, the anthropological givens we discussed at the outset limit the free play of potential representations.

First, it is of decisive importance whether the historian was a contemporary of the events he reports or whether he was born later. Up until the eighteenth century the eyewitness, and to an even greater extent the participant, seemed to enjoy by virtue of his situation a cognitive advantage that assured the truth of his history. It was only with the experience of progress—or, in methodological terms, with the development of historical-philological criticism—that increasing distance from past events came to serve as a guarantee of better understanding. But who would want for that reason to forgo the memoirs of Commynes, of Frederick the Great, or of Churchill, which they wrote as actors and as eye-witnesses? Whether the historian was born earlier or later affects the perspective of his work, but it does not determine its quality.

Second, the historian’s perspective is conditioned by his social and political status, by whether he is higher or lower. It is also conditioned by whether he belongs to the winners or to the losers. Thucydides, Polybius, Sallust, Tacitus, Augustine, Commynes, Machiavelli, and Guiccardini—and even Marx—were members of the vanquished party as they analyzed and portrayed the events of their times. It was precisely because of defeat or exile, because their history had not taken the desired course, that they were forced to develop new questions and methods. The need to explain, the pressure to clarify, was greater for them than for the victors. For the victors, success speaks for itself.

Third, it is decisive for the historian’s selection whether he belongs to the political, religious, social, or economic entity whose history he portrays, identifying himself more or less critically with it, or whether he is looking on from outside, writing, as it were, *apolis*, as Lucian demanded. Thus in one way or another his options are channeled, so to speak, prelinguistically. The metaphistorical givens we discussed at the outset (earlier/later, inside/outside, above/below) determine in their own particular ways the cognitive possibilities of a history and thus circumscribe its status prelinguistically.

Our observation that no history ever agrees entirely with what is said about it prior to or during the events is even truer when we cast a retrospective glance at previous history and at what is said subsequent to the events. In every history there is both more and less included than individual historians with their particular perspectives are able to say. Just how is a uniquely enacted history constituted linguistically? Besides oral tradition there are roughly three possibilities: writing down, copying, and revising (*Aufschreiben, Abschreiben, Umschreiben*).

As to the first of these possibilities, every history that we have not ourselves lived through or learned about through hearsay had to have been written down for the first time at some point. What otherwise would have been lost to
posterity was thereby preserved for memory. Whether or not the history was preceded by narratives, epics, legends, sagas, anecdotes; whether or not witnesses were questioned (if that was still possible); whether or not written sources were examined and compared in order to ascertain the past—these are all questions of method. What is absolutely essential for the constitution of history is the first act of writing down. The prior reality is transformed into the status of written history, and with this transformation the difference between the unique past events and the linguistic form that they subsequently assumed also takes on fixed shape. The epistemological consequences of this are not inconsiderable: epistemologically, the linguistic form of a history now gains precedence over the earlier relations between events and their linguistic articulations.

A history that has run its course remains uniquely what it was. If it is regarded as worthy of recollection, it is usually because there was something surprising about it, something that men sought to explain. Explanations that make the unique, often surprising, course of events understandable and transparent have greater durability than do the particular, transitory events themselves—otherwise they would not be explanations. But these explanations are first put forward in a linguistic framework: unlike the events themselves, they are dependent solely upon their linguistic communication.

We are all familiar with the ultimate causes, implicit or explicit, that give histories consistency, and possibly even meaning. Whether it is gods or spirits that intervene to give lasting explanation for change, whether it is fortune or fate that is invoked, whether it is the God of Christianity whose will determines all things, or whether it is political, social, psychological, or economic conditions that serve to explain particular events: in every case it is linguistically fixed explanations that give a transitory sequence of events its enduring meaning or its specific significance.

This should make the second form of historiography, copying, easy to understand. As long as histories continue to be copied and transmitted one may conclude that the recorded experiences replicate or correspond to what is already stored up in the linguistic foundations. Or, to put it differently, as long as no contradictions emerge between the explanations contained in the traditional histories and those that are employed in contemporary histories, the task of the historian is comparatively simple: he simply copies the old histories and adds the new ones. The explanations—be they religious, theological, political, psychological, social, or economic—become stabilized and serve as a kind of protection against any fundamental surprises, even though particular events may be surprising. All histories remain explicable as long as their explanatory presuppositions are not called into question. From this perspective it also becomes clear why history could have been regarded for centuries as an element of rhetoric and its linguistic continuity, and why
the Christian interpretation of history remained stable for so long: the biblical history was the axis of all histories.

But the third form of historiography, revising, is more challenging and itself requires some explanation. Within the context of the historical-philological criticism of sources—a process that has been increasingly refined since the time of the Renaissance—revision is a relatively clear and reasonable undertaking. In this process, the original portions of a text are distinguished from later copies or additions, falsifications are unmasked, and the motives and interests of the author are sought behind the text. Sometimes new sources are discovered that cause us to read the older sources in a different way. Sometimes mistaken older readings are corrected. In short, we have here an authentic instance of scientific progress leading to a revision of history—one that remains, however, within the framework of the historical-philological method. But such progress, which is immanent to the course of research, is in no way inevitable; it leaves unanswered the question as to why histories that were at one time plausible (and hence copied) should be subject to revision at all. In other words, the new explanations themselves need to be justified. This is the genuine locus of source criticism. Source criticism itself only becomes possible when new questions emerge; in itself, it is only a means to answer new questions that could not be answered by the history previously handed down.

Every revision of history occurs, therefore, under the pressure of a transformation of experience that compels the historian to replace or supplement previous explanations with new ones. In this way the linguistic status of past histories is changed without their ceasing to be the "same" history.

It would certainly be a mistake to think that this accommodation of older histories to the then current forms of experience only started with the Renaissance and the Reformation, and with the historical-philological criticism that accompanied them. On the contrary, the revision of history—and that means source criticism as well—began with the writing down of history itself.

It was a great achievement of Herodotus not just to have written down for the first time much that up until then had only been handed down orally, but also to have called into question, critically, the things that the myths, the epics, and the stories of the people related. Nor did Thucydides merely copy Herodotus, though he did that too; more significantly, he revised him. Whenever Thucydides treats a period that Herodotus had already related in detail, he changes the line of reasoning. Thucydides presents everything he reports, about cultural-historical, archeological, religious, military, semantic, or other events, not as isolated episodes, each one for its own sake; rather, he constructs these reports into arguments, in order to show, for example, that the Peloponnesian War was greater than the Persian War, which Herodotus
had recorded. Further, Thucydides developed a diachronic model of process that brought out clearly the unique growth of Athenian power as a historical cause of the war; and behind this diachronic model of process there appears the ultimate explanation of all history, which is understood in terms of the pathology of human power and its blindness. But that meant the disappearance—at least from history as constituted by language—of the religious background, from which Herodotus had still been able to derive a justice immanent in the course of history. One looks in vain in Thucydides for a religiously motivated justification of the course of events.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus the step from Herodotus to Thucydides—that is, the change from one generation to the next—already involved more than just the copying of old histories and the adding of new ones; there was a revision of history. In writing down his history of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides attained a perception of it that corresponded to his own experience: he viewed it as a pathological struggle consuming the adversaries themselves. Insofar as he reduced his history to such a political history he reshaped the historical reports that he had from Herodotus, such as the murder of the tyrant, and adapted them so that they fit into his new explanatory structure.

This first, classical case of revision can be taken as paradigmatic for all the others that were to follow it. We need only recall the geographic interconnection of individual histories in Polybius, who was able, retrospectively, to discover connections that had not previously been perceived. Such episodes were to occur again and again after the eighteenth century. We might also recall the model of the psychology of terror developed by Tacitus, which has permitted new conclusions to be drawn, retrospectively, about previously known realities. Or we might recall Eusebius, Augustine, and Orosius, who consigned the experiential contents of antiquity to oblivion to the extent that they were incompatible with the Christian interpretation of the world. We might point to the rediscovery of the political realm in the late middle ages, above all by Machiavelli, in light of which the entire Christian history of the middle ages could be revised. We could mention the history of social relations and economic structure, with whose aid Scottish authors revised all previous history to accord with their new experience in the shadow of the growing English power. Or we could mention Marx. Marx did not refute the political approach to history practiced, for instance, by Ranke; rather, he supplemented Ranke by drawing political history into new and different—and likewise more enduring—explanatory contexts, namely, the networks of economic conditions. We can also predict with some certainty that soon we will be able to

read an ecological historical writing, one that, in accordance with our own experience, will relocate the entirety of past history within the context of the scarcity of resources and the environmental bases of human action.

What do these instances tell us about the relationship that prevails between a reality that is over and done and its linguistic elaboration?

History ex post exists for us only to the extent that it is written down, copied, and revised. Regardless of what prelinguistic givens enter, or have entered, history, the reality of past histories is present only in their linguistic shapes. Many of the events and chains of events of the past may be regarded as having been plausibly handed down, as methodologically trustworthy. And so we too can go on copying what we know through the linguistic tradition.

But what explanations are acceptable, what explanations can be repeatedly applied—these are questions that every historian has to decide in the present. The explanations that tell us why something happened one way and not another must be rationally clear, must correspond to our own experience, and must be capable of including new experiences. Many of the experiences of antiquity could occur again—probably much more easily than we in modern times would like to believe. And if we are compelled to undergo new experiences we will not be able to avoid seeing the old histories in new ways, and so we will have to revise them. But they will not thereby cease to be the “same” histories.

The difference between past reality and its linguistic elaboration will never be overcome. As Epictetus once said: It is not what has been done that disturbs people, but what is said about it.\footnote{Epictetus, \textit{Encheiridion}, chap. 5.}