

Interpretation

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3	<i>Hannes Kerber</i>	Leo Strauss on Exoteric Writing
27	<i>Marco Menon</i>	An Interpretation of Machiavelli's <i>Favola</i>
45	<i>Lloyd Robertson</i>	Review Essays <i>Ezekiel 38–48: A New Translation, with Introduction and Commentary</i> by Stephen L. Cook
61	<i>David Lewis Schaefer</i>	<i>Political Philosophy and the Republican Future: Rediscovering Cicero</i> by Gregory Bruce Smith
87	<i>Matthew Berry</i>	Book Reviews <i>The Alt-Right: What Everyone Needs to Know</i> by George Hawley
93	<i>Marco Menon</i>	<i>All'alba di un mondo nuovo</i> by Angelo Panebianco and Sergio Belardinelli
99	<i>Will Morrisey</i>	<i>The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project</i> by Rémi Brague
107	<i>Mary P. Nichols</i>	<i>Aristotle: Democracy and Political Science</i> by Delba P. Winthrop
119	<i>David A. Nordquest</i>	<i>Educating Liberty: Democracy and Aristocracy in J. S. Mill's Political Thought</i> by Christopher Barker
125	<i>Wendell O'Brien</i>	<i>Tractatus Politico-Philosophicus</i> by W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz
131	<i>Alexander Orwin</i>	<i>Glaucon's Fate: History, Myth, and Character in Plato's "Republic"</i> by Jacob Howland
137	<i>Joshua Parens</i>	<i>Leo Strauss and His Catholic Readers</i> by Geoffrey M. Vaughn
141	<i>John Ray</i>	<i>Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body</i> by Corine Pelluchon
145	<i>David Lewis Schaefer</i>	<i>Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad</i> by Michael Walzer
155	<i>Georg Simmerl</i>	<i>Von Carl Schmitt zu Hannah Arendt?</i> by Sebastian Huhnholz

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Sebastian Huhnholz, *Von Carl Schmitt zu Hannah Arendt? Heidelberger Entstehungsspuren und bundesrepublikanische Liberalisierungsschichten von Reinhart Kosellecks "Kritik und Krise."* Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2019, 172 pp., € 39.90 (paperback).

Koselleck, Schmitt, and German Liberalization

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In the intellectual history of the early Bundesrepublik, Reinhart Koselleck's dissertation *Kritik und Krise* has the status of an almost mythical object.¹ Conceived and written in the storied academic environment of Heidelberg University, the thesis, defended in 1954 and published in 1959, soon earned Koselleck both prestige and notoriety. This was due not only to the almost irresistible crisis narrative, with which the young philosopher-historian put eighteenth-century Enlightenment on trial for having established a hypocritical mode of critique that made modernity an eternal political crisis. The notoriety, in particular, stemmed from one of Koselleck's teachers outside Heidelberg University: Carl Schmitt, who was banned from official academic life for openly refusing denazification. Koselleck acknowledged his indebtedness to Schmitt in the preface to the published edition, in which he thanked him right after his supervisor (they had seen each other regularly since 1950 and had an intensive correspondence).

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

The commonsensical strand in the reception of *Kritik und Krise*, as coined by Jürgen Habermas's review in 1961, relegated Koselleck to a mere mouthpiece of Schmitt.² Beginning with the preface to the second edition in 1969, Koselleck started a long array of apologies and rephrasings in response. But when *Kritik und Krise* was included in Suhrkamp's paperback series in 1973—a reason why it remains even today one of the most successful humanities dissertations on the German book market—with an anonymized citation of a review actually written by Schmitt on its back cover, a clandestine testimony was given to the fact that with the rise of Koselleck it was also Schmitt's thought that was coming to prominence at the heart of West German academia. Nonetheless, Koselleck continued to counter the onerous accusation of having initially been a pure Schmittian until late in his life. In interviews on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his dissertation, he recalled the diverse inspirations he had drawn on. One of his mentions was Hannah Arendt and her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (first German edition 1955), which he claimed to have benefited from when revising the manuscript for publication, and he even recalled having an exchange with her in Heidelberg in 1956.

As its subtitle suggests, the new book from Dr. Sebastian Huhnholz, a political scientist at University of Hannover, starts from a fine grasp of the analytical problems at stake here. To excavate submerged "traces" that the academic environment of 1950s Heidelberg left on *Kritik und Krise*, it sets out to ablate the "layers of liberalization" that enclose this book, since the self-interpretations Koselleck later gave of his thesis are deeply intertwined with the intellectual consolidation of the Bundesrepublik—and Arendt's supposed influence could be both, an actual trace or a retrospectively attached layer of liberalization. To argue that Koselleck, over the course of his acclaimed career, became a liberal scholar is not controversial. But Huhnholz is the first to fully take into consideration the possibility that his dissertation already pointed in this direction. Drawing on large parts of Koselleck's literary estate, he is able to provide an illuminating contextualization of the production of *Kritik und Krise* and its immediate reception.

What sets this study on the wrong track, however, is its guiding question: From Carl Schmitt to Hannah Arendt? Since Koselleck never claimed that Arendt's influence on the revised manuscript was profound, let alone

² Habermas deleted the final sentence of the review, which contained this claim, in subsequent essay collections that were published after he had completed his thematically similar *habilitation*, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he drew both on Schmitt and Koselleck.

that it rivaled Carl Schmitt's, this choice has distorting effects. First and foremost, it pushes Huhnholz to constantly downplay the sway Schmitt held over the doctoral student Koselleck. He even goes so far as to call it "absurd" to approach *Kritik und Krise* primarily via Schmitt and claims (without any convincing evidence) that the thesis was largely conceived before they met (7–8). Huhnholz consequently succeeds in demarcating where Koselleck set himself apart from his mentor. But the author fails to adequately assess Koselleck's discipleship, even by his own standards—namely, a focus on what Koselleck likely had read while crafting his dissertation and how he read it (according to the inventory of his literary estate and the annotations that can be found in these books).

Huhnholz picks up the well-known claim that Koselleck drew mainly on Schmitt's study of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in arguing that the freedom of conscience the absolutist state granted was exploited by the Enlightenment's critical practices to finally bring this state down (the copy of Schmitt's study that Koselleck cited has, like many others, not been preserved in his literary estate). But Huhnholz transforms this into the rather controversial assertion that apart from the interpretation of Hobbes in its first chapter, Schmitt was of only marginal importance for the rest of Koselleck's dissertation. While this assessment morphs at times into the more far-reaching yet still understating judgment that the thesis was only Schmittian in methodological terms, Huhnholz's presentation of Koselleck's readings tends to obscure exactly this analytical Schmittianism.

For example, with regard to Schmitt's *Donoso Cortés in gesamt-europäischer Interpretation*, Huhnholz discusses an insignificant passage on page 75 to speculate about possible inspirations for Koselleck's understanding of the counterrevolution (which was not addressed in *Kritik und Krise*) and to substantiate his claim that Koselleck did not care for the political-theological arguments in these lines. What he leaves out, however, are two passages that Koselleck marked extensively in *Donoso* as well. One is Schmitt's introductory update of political theology to an analysis of myths directing the masses, myths that Schmitt in 1950 assumed to derive mostly from the philosophies of history that informed competing projects of political planning. (Such a combined critique of utopianism and planning also framed Koselleck's dissertation, but this is convincingly shown by Huhnholz to have been the standard procedure of members of a broader intellectual milieu centered in postwar Heidelberg.) More importantly, Huhnholz leaves unmentioned that Koselleck in 1950 also marked on page 100 of his copy of *Donoso* Schmitt's

stated conviction that the German intellectual history of the last two centuries had been fatefully connected to the words “critique” and “crisis,” that is, the very analytical scheme his dissertation would adopt (based on the complementary assumption that the eighteenth century did not yet understand the immanent relationship between critique and crisis and thus did not use “crisis” as a central concept). Koselleck later vaguely professed that its title derived from Schmitt’s advice to inquire into the use of concepts in concrete historical situations.

The methodological indebtedness of Koselleck’s dissertation to Schmitt does not stop here. In an endnote to the unpublished edition, he lauded Schmitt for having always spelled out the historical correspondence of ideational self-evidences and political structures, a methodological tenet further explicated in Schmitt’s *Political Theology*. While citing this book directly to attest to the intrusion of divine qualities into absolutist conceptions of sovereignty, Koselleck also systematically followed its methodology (the copy in Koselleck’s literary estate is not analyzed by Huhnholz). In the first chapter, Koselleck presented the absolutist state as a political organization that had the same structure as the then dominant mode of thinking (a secularizing separation of politics and morality) and thus had for its early contemporaries a situated self-evidence born of the pacification of the religious wars which subsequent, self-enlightening generations would no longer understand. Thus, they unleashed these wars again, at first as a war of opinions in the public sphere that led to the French Revolution. And it is to a polemical analysis of the polemic use of doctrines in these debates, as pioneered by the sociology of concepts also explicated in Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, that Koselleck largely devoted the two remaining chapters of his dissertation.

Perhaps Huhnholz did not detail this because he simply reduces the analytical interest of Schmitt’s political theology to secularized ideologies and argues, plausibly, that its main polemical effect was a Christianizing reenchantment of history which presumably Koselleck did not aspire to as he unambiguously affirmed the absolutist state as an agent of religious neutralization (9, 13n14, 35n1, 46–47, 130–31). Another reason might be Huhnholz’s contextualist approach, which leads him to largely refrain from any analysis of the primary text and to follow Koselleck’s later rephrasings of it instead—and this is where he also begins to miss the argumentative indebtedness of Koselleck’s dissertation to Schmitt. For example, Huhnholz echoes the later Koselleck’s claim that *Kritik und Krise* was about the incapacity of the utopian bourgeoisie to act politically (8, 78–79, 81, 82). In the text, however, Koselleck

mentioned only the bourgeoisie's powerlessness in the absolutist state, which caused the bourgeoisie to articulate a moralistic critique that Koselleck considered nonetheless a serious political act. The creeping destruction of the absolutist state by the Enlightenment's supposedly unpolitical critique was described by Koselleck as the effectuation of "indirect political forces," a phrase Schmitt used in his book on *Leviathan* that in any case does something rather different from lamenting the bourgeoisie's incapacity to act politically.

One specific instance of the at times unreliable claims of the later Koselleck, however, is investigated by this study at great length, namely, that he had profited from Arendt's thought when revising the manuscript. Its second-longest chapter tries unsuccessfully to ascertain when Koselleck could have met Arendt in Heidelberg around 1956. But in the analysis of the textual evidence of a possible influence of Arendt—which is one new footnote in *Kritik und Krise* compared to the unpublished version—it finally becomes clear what close reading can contribute to careful contextualization (120–27). Huhnholz shows that Koselleck, while thinning out the direct citations of Schmitt's works, filled in a footnote that had criticized Arendt's interpretation of Hobbes as the pioneer of the liberal bourgeoisie; Koselleck emphasized, over and against this interpretation, that Hobbes had not argued for the protection of private property and could not foresee what civil society would make out of the security his state granted. Since, as Huhnholz admits, this can still be considered a Schmittian line of argument, and since Huhnholz had shown before that it was very likely Schmitt himself who had drawn Koselleck's attention to Arendt's *Origins*, it stands to reason that her influence on the published dissertation was in a meaningful sense a retrospective projection and was in any case filtered by the PhD candidate's relation to Schmitt.

What becomes manifest in the triangle Schmitt-Koselleck-Arendt is the problem of German liberalization. Huhnholz portrays Arendt as a figure fulfilling the early Bundesrepublik's intellectual need for liberalization—which Koselleck all too understandably tried retrospectively to attach himself to—but at the same time, Huhnholz details the critique of liberalism she articulated in her *Origins* and finally identifies her as a republican political theorist. Huhnholz even registers intersections between Arendt's and Schmitt's thought, only to prematurely resolve them by grouping at least Schmitt's thought in a definitive camp. His thought interchangeably figures as "anti-liberal" (38), "right-wing extremist" (42n25), "inhumane" (69), and "anti-Semitic" (132), which might be true for his political sentiments (in the case of his anti-Semitism without a doubt) but circumvents more delicate

questions. Huhnholz touches on them when invoking Leo Strauss's initial criticism—that Schmitt's thinking, mostly as a result of his interpretation of Hobbes, was bound up in the aporias of liberalism—but he trivializes this criticism by claiming that Schmitt simply exploited these aporias for anti-liberal purposes (13, 61n17, 75, 79). This is all the more astonishing since Huhnholz repeatedly mentions different intellectual currents that drew on Schmitt's work to stabilize the early Bundesrepublik, into which the later Koselleck has been grouped by several other commentators—liberal conservatism and a liberalized Schmittianism. Some of his findings, most importantly Koselleck's unambiguous affirmation of the absolutist state as an agent of neutralization, could have plausibly shown that it was a protoliberal Schmittianism that developed in his dissertation. But in the end, Huhnholz is content with concluding that the early Koselleck slavishly followed neither the radical Schmitt nor the republican Arendt and that this could be considered a liberal approach anyway (142). Consequently, the question of how, exactly, the intellectual development of Schmitt's pupil Koselleck reflected the peculiar character of German liberalization remains unanswered.