5 Writing the History of Democracy as a History of Tensions, Antinomies and Indeterminacies

Pierre Rosanvallon's Method of Conceptual History

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Discussions of Pierre Rosanvallon's oeuvre most often focus on his thoughts on contemporary challenges of democracy – like the emergence of a 'counter-democracy' or the strengthening of an executive orientation of politics (Rosanvallon 2006a; 2015a). His innovative contribution to conceptual history and the history of ideas has, however, so far received only marginal attention. In the eye of the hasty reader, who does not bother to comprehend the specifics of this approach, the numerous passages pertaining to the 'long 19th century', which can be found in most of Rosanvallon's books, might even seem somewhat tedious and superfluous, only of interest to a small circle of historians. But this would be a serious misunderstanding. Rather, Rosanvallon's investigations into the problems of contemporary politics are inseparable from the very form in which they are developed – the form of a historically saturated self-enlightenment of democracy. Since his early writings, the refoundation of a 'history of the political' has thus constituted a Leitmotiv of Rosanvallon's work.

Rosanvallon himself describes his method as an "histoire conceptuelle du politique" (Rosanvallon 1986; 2003) – a term which has sometimes been translated literally as "conceptual history of the political" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 46) and sometimes more freely as "philosophical history of the political" (Rosanvallon

2001).[1] But in contrast to other prominent authors like Quentin Skinner or Reinhart Koselleck, who shaped the recent historiography of ideas and concepts, Rosanvallon has not elaborated much on his own method. In an afterword to an anthology dedicated to his work, edited by Al-Matary and Guénard (2015), Rosanvallon tells his readers that, over the years, he has been invited many times to formalize his method, in order to found a recognizable 'school of thought' and secure his influence in academia, but that he deliberately abstained from this (Rosanvallon 2015b: 236). Instead, he preferred the practical demonstration of his approach (and its potential) by means of his own proper analyses of different historical subjects (Rosanvallon 2011b: 193).

With all this in mind, the present article[2] nevertheless tries to pin down some constituent elements of what can be seen as Rosanvallon's contribution to the methodological debate. Because even if it was never his intent to found his own school of thought, a better comprehension of his method can help us to re-think the boundaries both between past and present, and between theoretical concepts and practical experience. This kind of critical self-reflection is highly called for in the contemporary context, as traditional history of ideas has come under external and institutional pressure to explain what makes it a legitimate part of Political Science and Political Philosophy, beyond being a mere 'archive' of thoughts that would otherwise long be forgotten. But such a process of self-reflection requires turning the messy factual pluralism of methods into a more 'structured paradigmatic competition' from which scientific progress can arise (Straßenberger/Münkler 2007: 52; my transl.). Rosanvallon adds a coherent and inspiring paradigm to this competition – and, what is more, one that is closer to Political Theory than the established methodological triad of *Cambridge School, Begriffsgeschichte and Foucauldian analysis of discourse* (cf. Eberl and Marciniak 2011).

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1 Rosanvallon (1995: 26f.) himself has conceded that the term could have been coined more precisely; thereby suggesting that he does not concern himself primarily with a catchy denomination.

2 This is a revised and updated version of an article first published in German in the 2016 special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Politische Theorie* on Rosanvallon. I thank Heike Mauer for helping me with the translation.

1. A CRITIQUE OF CONVENTIONAL INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Rosanvallon sharply distinguishes his 'conceptual history of the political' from conventional 'history of ideas' and even situates his own approach at a "great distance from intellectual history" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 55). Of course, this does not mean that he sees no point in engaging himself with the thoughts of authors from the past. Rather, he opposes a certain kind of intellectual history, which – much to his regret – can still be found in many introductory textbooks.[3] His critique – but, as we will see, not the consequences he draws from it – is very similar to the attack mounted by Quentin Skinner on conventional historians of ideas in *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* in 1969.

First and foremost, Rosanvallon opposes the widespread inclination to produce yet another historical 'compendium'. That is to say, that all too often the history of ideas amounts to a mere juxtaposition of single facts and summaries, mostly in chronological form, but without any overarching research problem (Rosanvallon 1986: 97). However, in Rosanvallon's view, a certain style of writing the history of single doctrines, for example socialism or liberalism, that confines itself to the genealogy of a doctrine whose supposedly fully developed, 'final' shape one believes to know, is equally misconceived. This kind of historiography (which is common with Marxists, but not limited to them), does not take seriously the process of history itself (Rosanvallon 1986: 98). This stance of Rosanvallon is similar to Skinner's critique of a "mythology of doctrines", denouncing a "form of non-history which is almost entirely given over to pointing out earlier 'anticipation' of later doctrines" (Skinner 1969: 11). The same accusation of anachronism is put forward with regard to 'text-centered comparativism' – by which is meant an approach where texts and thoughts from very different contexts are compiled and compared with reference to seemingly timeless concepts like freedom, equality or justice, ignoring that the same words and phrases can take on very different and specific meanings. Again, the similarities with Skinner's warnings not to confound the "persistence of […] expressions" with a "persistence of the questions which the expressions may have been used to answer" are quite obvious (Skinner 1969: 39). Furthermore, Rosanvallon opposes any attempt to generate a unified 'grand theory' in retrospect out of dispersed fragments or statements by an

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3   Busen and Weiß (2013: 33) have analyzed a selection of introductory German textbooks used for teaching the history of political ideas and concepts. It is their conclusion that pretty much all of these books neglect the 'methodological reflexivity' which is common in other domains of political science.

author (i.e. trying to bridge the gap between Rousseau's second *Discours* and his *Contrat Social* even though Rousseau himself never claimed this kind of coherence). To both Rosanvallon and Skinner, who on his part criticizes a "mythology of coherence", this is nothing but an act of cheating in order to falsely attribute one's own ideas to more authoritative authors, instead of taking their texts seriously and treating them in the same way one does other historical sources (Rosanvallon 1986: 99; Skinner 1969: 18f.). In Rosanvallon's view, the desire to quickly classify all oeuvres and authors in ready-made categories and subcategories constitutes a final aberration: the ability to differentiate and label ten different substrands of liberalism without hesitation, a posture by which some writers superficially show off their scholarship, simulates false intellectual sovereignty and basically substitutes technical classification for real understanding (Rosanvallon 1986: 99).

In short: Rosanvallon opposes a kind of writing history which treats historical works as the mere "imposing wreckage of failed voyages since left on the shores of the past" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 45), subsequently disposing of these stranded goods as one thinks fit. In Rosanvallon's view, in contrast, 'ideas' and 'theories' do not exist independently of historical experience and therefore cannot be labeled, canonized or exploited without taking into account the larger context. They have to be understood along the lines of historical conflicts and challenges resulting from practical, political life (Rosanvallon 1998: 362). In order to make sense of it, the fragmented intellectual 'wreckage' of bygone days needs to be resituated "in a general framework of interpretation and exploration" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 45). This requires that we not only focus on canonized works, but equally take into account newspaper pieces, political speeches, anonymous brochures, 'grey literature' and other sources (Rosanvallon 1986: 101; Rosanvallon 2006b: 46). Up to this point, Rosanvallon seems to concur with Skinner's approach of analyzing a multitude of contemporaneous sources in order to retrace the meaning that the author might have wanted to give to a text within that very specific context (Skinner 1969: 49). Yet, when Rosanvallon refers to 'context', he does not quite mean the same thing as Skinner.

2. CONTEXT AND MEANING IN THE HISTORY OF CONCEPTS AND IDEAS

The relationship between historical context and political concepts can be analyzed from two different angles. One can try to *add* as much historical context as possible to the interpretation of a single work, in order to better understand what the

individual author actually wanted to do. This, in a nutshell, is Quentin Skinner's method, who focuses not so much on the meaning of words but rather analyzes their use in concrete historical situations: "There is no history of the idea to be written, but only a history necessarily focused on the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it." (Skinner 1969: 38; cf. Skinner 2002) Hence, writing Political Theory itself must be understood as a kind of political action with critical or legitimizing intent. For instance, according to Skinner, Thomas Hobbes' concept of political representation needs to be understood as a 'reply' to the specific political situation in mid-17th century England: Hobbes developed his theory of the fictional sovereign in opposition to existing proto-democratic forces, presumably trying to undermine their claims to legitimacy (Skinner 2005). It is only indirectly and in retrospect that these divergent intentions and contexts add up to recognizable patterns of theorizing the state (Skinner 2012).[4]

But there is a second angle. Ideas and concepts themselves can be understood as historical sources, as a kind of context, providing information about bigger, underlying social and political developments. This is – simply put – the method of Reinhart Koselleck and his *Begriffsgeschichte*, which tries to retrace the "dissolution of the old society of orders or estates, and the development of the modern world" by looking at how these twin processes have been "registered through language" (Koselleck 2011: 8).[5] What is of interest here is not merely the intention of a single author, but rather the trail of inertia and change, that can be traced throughout the centuries. Or, in Koselleck's words, the "long-term, profound, and at times convulsive transformation of everyday experience" that reveals itself in the evolution of concepts (Koselleck 2011: 9). Thus, if we look at the article on "representation" in the famous lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, co-edited by Koselleck, the main focus is not on the (de-)legitimizing intentions that underlie a specific understanding of representation. Rather, the article tracks long-term

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4 There is a vast literature on the Cambridge School. For an overview cp. Tully (1988) and Palonen (2002). I will not here address the question of whether, and to what extent, Skinner might have diverged from his own method in his more recent works (cp. Lane 2012).

5 To Koselleck, a concept is not the same thing as a word. Rather, it "bundles together the richness of historical experience and the sum of theoretical and practical lessons drawn from it in such a way that their relationship can be established and properly understood only through a concept" (Koselleck 2011: 20). For a discussion of the metatheoretical premises and implications of this understanding of concepts, cp. Egner (2013: 88), Palonen (2002), Huhnholz (2015) and Koselleck (1989).

changes of the concept of representation since the middle-ages, the age of abso-
lutism and the constitution of estates until modern parliamentarianism (Podlech
1984).

Rosanvallon's approach in turn can be interpreted as an attempt to systemati-
cally combine both angles. In his first text on methods, written in 1986, Rosanval-
lon himself speaks highly of Skinner, whom he praises for bringing new impulses
and perspectives to the history of ideas. But at the same time, Rosanvallon takes
great care to clarify that his own project is quite different from the one pursued by
the protagonists of the *Cambridge School* (Rosanvallon 1986: 104f.). On the other
hand, a proximity of Rosanvallon and Koselleck has occasionally been noted (Ber-
nardi 2015: 40). And again, Rosanvallon does not deny mutual inspiration, but
clearly distinguishes his work from Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*. In an inter-
view, he recounts: "I knew Koselleck well personally. […] His *Begriffsgeschichte*
was likewise a very important asset to me. But I wanted to go further, beyond a
contextual and philological history of ideas […] I've never wanted to separate a
renewed history of ideas from a strictly political history." (Rosanvallon 2007: 711)
His critiques of Koselleck and Skinner seem like two sides of a mirror: On the one
hand, the project of *Begriffsgeschichte* is deemed too abstract and too philological,
primarily analyzing dictionaries and, according to Rosanvallon, not sufficiently
taking into account real political struggles and the expectations and disappoint-
ments that come with them. On the other hand, Skinner is accused of giving too
much attention to single intents and contingent contexts of actions, failing to en-
vision even the possibility that texts from different decades might still be under-
stood with reference to the same political problems (Rosanvallon 1986: 105; cf.
Bernardi 2015: 36).

Fittingly, Rosanvallon (1986: 96) characterizes his own approach as the writ-
ing of history *on a razor's edge* ("sur le fil du rasoir"). On one side, a rich and
profound reconstruction of past political conflicts intends – in full accordance with
Skinner – to give back to history its openness and its 'presence': "What interests
me is understanding the political experience of the past all over again, making it
come alive once more […]. Therefore, the point is to re-invest the past with its
dimension of indeterminacy." (Rosanvallon 2007: 710) Here, history is under-
stood as an open "succession of presents", each of which is new and unprece-
dented (Rosanvallon 2006b: 38). But on the other side, Rosanvallon also wants –
like Koselleck – to retrace the continuities and changes within the bigger patterns
of interpretation and categorization, transcending single experiences and situa-
tions. This clearly presupposes that we can in some way discover a kind of 'struc-
ture' in political history that cannot be reduced to the actions and experiences of

individual authors and agents. Rosanvallon himself even speaks of a "global social imaginary" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 45).

But can you have it all? One might question whether Rosanvallon's 'method' is really more than an improvised combination of existing approaches. And isn't he, in the end, sketching a 'methodological utopia'[6], which, due to its totalizing claims, cannot actually be put to use in practical research? Part of the answer is given in Rosanvallon's own books. There, he has proven "persistently and convincingly" (Raphael 2013: 19; my transl.) that not only can his research program indeed be put to practice, but also that it is possible to combine the respective approaches of Skinner and Koselleck in a way that is both novel, and that gives us original insights. For instance, Rosanvallon's own study of the history of representation is based on a rich and detailed account of the competing answers – that were given in different historical contexts by specific actors – to the question of where, how and by whom the people could be made present. This account is combined impressively with an analysis of different overarching 'imaginaries' of representation – from the ideal of an abstract representation of unity, passing through the attempts to give direct presence to different social groups, to the 'democracy of equilibrium' that is shaped by parties and labor unions (Rosanvallon 1998; cf. Weymans 2007). But the autonomy and originality of Rosanvallon's 'histoire conceptuelle du politique' can also be asserted with regard to methodology and meta-theoretical premises. At the risk of schematizing matters a little too much, I will nevertheless outline three main points that – in my view – characterize this originality of Rosanvallon.

3. THREE BASIC ELEMENTS OF A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF THE POLITICAL

3.1 The political as a distinct object of history

A first fundamental theoretical decision that distinguishes Rosanvallon's approach from that of Skinner or Koselleck is already illustrated by the term he uses to name his project: a history of *the political*, thereby taking up a prominent distinction in French political philosophy.[7] At first glance, the term remains somewhat vague:

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6   The expression stems from Rosanvallon (1995: 32) himself, who uses it to describe his ideal of finding those points of intersection where the history of empirical politics and the history of political ideas overlap.

7   Regarding the difference between politics and the political cp. Bedorf/Röttgers (2010).

"to refer to 'the political' rather than to 'politics' is to speak of power and law, state and nation, equality and justice, identity and difference, citizenship and civility – in sum, of everything that constitutes political life beyond the immediate field of partisan competition for political power, everyday governmental action, and the ordinary function of institutions" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 36).

Here, Rosanvallon is following his teacher Claude Lefort. Thinking about the political, according to Lefort (2001: 20 and 282), is to think about the specific forms and ways a political community is instituted – a question that has never been asked by a mainstream of Political Science oriented towards scientism. Rosanvallon develops this more philosophical attitude into a historical research program, thereby also distancing himself from the 'new political history' that Réné Remond tried to revive in France during the 1980s (Rosanvallon 1995: 27; cf. Jennings 2001 for the intellectual context in France). But unlike Carl Schmitt or Chantal Mouffe, Rosanvallon does not claim to have unveiled a timeless, ontological structure of the political that supposedly precedes historical experience and merely 'ontic' manifestations.[8] According to Rosanvallon, the concept of the political rather is a kind of "présupposé méthodologique" (Rosanvallon 1986: 96) – a conceptual prerequisite necessary in order to systematize and make sense of disparate sources and bodies of texts. The political, as Rosanvallon understands it, is both a social field and a process. Firstly, as a field, it is "the site where the multiple threads of the lives of men and women come together, what allows all of their activities and discourses to be understood in an overall framework"; secondly, the political can also be understood as an "always contentious process whereby the explicit or implicit rules" of what citizens "can share and accomplish in common – rules which give a form to the life of the polity – are elaborated" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 34). Writing the history of the political means, to start with, to understand this process in its indeterminacy and its richness in experiences. In a second step of analysis, the resulting historical patterns organizing the field of the political are to be retraced.

It is this twofold definition of the political which, in itself, connects both research angles that I have attributed before to Skinner and Koselleck – a context-based understanding of past actions on the one hand, and on the other the study of long-term structure and its transformations. Both aspects converge in what Rosanvallon

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8 Mouffe (2005: 9), following Carl Schmitt, thinks of the political in terms of an ontological "dimension of antagonism". This is alien to Rosanvallon, who has no great sympathies for 'radical thinkers' like Mouffe, Žižek or Badiou (cp. Rosanvallon 2011b: 195f.).

(1986: 99) calls political 'rationalities' – they link the processual aspect to a certain order of discourse. Examples of such rationalities, underlying the problematization of voting rights in 19th century France, are 'reason' or 'number' – the rationality of enlightened discussion vs. the rationality of majority decision (Rosanvallon 1992). These 'rationalities' describe somewhat stable patterns of interpretation, which for their proper understanding nonetheless require a reconstruction of those contexts of action, in which they were articulated in the first place to legitimate or weaken certain democratic claims. These patterns crystallize along certain concepts like election, representation or law, and sometimes they may be articulated in form of a coherent 'theory'. Nonetheless, they cannot be thought of as proper 'ideas' of one single author. An understanding of voting rights alluding to ideals of 'reason' cannot only be discovered in the writings of Guizot, but – among others – also in administrative voting regulations, parliamentary speeches or in the symbolism used by (official or unofficial) agents. In some respects, this concept of 'political rationality' comes close to what Foucault once designated as *épistème*. Indeed, Rosanvallon (1995: 34) characterizes his own approach to history as a "renewal of Foucault's original intentions" (my translation). But according to Rosanvallon, Foucault himself subsequently failed to really grasp the Political, conceiving of politics only in mechanical terms of power and opposition.

3.2 A phenomenology of structuring antinomies

Rosanvallon specifies his broad conception of the political by adding another assumption. He supposes that the political rationalities mentioned above develop along the lines of constitutive "contradictions and ambiguities" and sets of "equivocations and tensions that have structured political modernity since its inception" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 37f.). 'Reason and number' as possible rationalities of voting are an example of such an ambiguity, the effects of which can still be noticed today (as the ongoing debate on voting rights for minors illustrates).

It is crucial to point out that this kind of ambiguity does not result from an imperfect definition or an improper understanding on the part of scientists or citizens. Rather, the ambiguity lies in the object itself. In the example of voting rights, the tension is a result of two contradictory imperatives: individual rights on the one hand, requiring that every voice is counted equally, and collective self-government, which demands some kind of reasonable orientation towards the 'public good', on the other. In modern democracies, both principles seem equally and quite inextricably linked to voting rights and political participation in general. Hence, this ambiguity shaped the evolution of modern democracy since its early beginnings. But it is 'constitutive' for democracy in an even stronger sense: It was,

according to Rosanvallon, ultimately impossible for contemporaries to conceptualize and to make sense of democratic rule outside or apart from this very tension. In *Le peuple introuvable*, Rosanvallon (1998: 31) analogously identifies a second constitutive tension: the antagonism between the abstract notion of 'the people' in constitutional law on the one hand and the empirical diversity and sociological representations of society on the other. These kinds of internal contradictions, occupying practitioners and theorists alike, organize and structure Rosanvallon's whole oeuvre. In *La contre-démocratie*, the argument is built around the tension between procedural legitimacy and societal distrust (Rosanvallon 2006a: 11). And his latest book, *Le bon gouvernement*, starts from the difference between democracy as an abstract institutional form and democracy as a tangible mode of action, namely of ruling and being ruled (Rosanvallon 2015a).

In a recent clarification regarding methods, Rosanvallon (2015b: 244ff.) distinguishes six specific kinds of ambiguity or antinomy. Firstly, he identifies a structural tension resulting from parallel, but contradictory aims (e.g. contradictory norms of what makes a 'good' representative). Secondly there are constitutive ambiguities resulting from necessarily different definitions of one single concept (e.g. 'the people' as a notion of constitutional law and as a sociological concept). A third antinomy results from effects of complexity and a fourth one from built-in functional asymmetries (take for example mechanisms to create public trust; they are required for democracy to work in the long run, but they are by nature opposed to the equally democratic, but more short-term function of distrust). Finally, and somewhat less elaborated, Rosanvallon cites variations of time and space as well as the plurality of forms: Democracy is not only a form of government, but also a form of praxis and a societal form in a more general sense. Whether this brief list is convincing may remain undecided here, and Rosanvallon himself would probably be the last person to dogmatize about it. The more important point here is the following: unlike Quentin Skinner, Rosanvallon claims that all of these tensions and aporias possess or develop to some degree a certain kind of obstinacy and permanence, thereby allowing to connect texts and theories independently of their authors' narrower intentions (cf. Bernardi 2015: 36).[9] Furthermore, Rosanvallon assumes that only a limited number of such ambiguities and antinomies are effective at a given time. It is along this limited number of

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9   From this follows – despite remaining fundamental differences – a certain resemblance to the approach of Niklas Luhmann, who has analyzed the rise and fall of historical semantics such as 'representation' or 'sovereignty' as attempts to come to grips with certain irresolvable internal paradoxes of the political system (cp. Luhmann 2000: 323f.). To my knowledge, Rosanvallon has never elaborated on this affinity.

tensions and aporias, that a thick, synchronic reconstruction of elapsed presents à la Skinner can purposefully be combined with a diachronic analysis of the long-term changes in the meaning of concepts – without getting lost in the "odds and ends of historical sources" or even the bottomless project of an 'histoire totale' (Raphael 2013: 17; my transl.).[10]

In a next step, Rosanvallon develops from this premise a corresponding set of specific research methods and narrative techniques. Thus, his approach towards historical source materials is shaped by the methodological imperative to prioritize the oppositions, disappointments, tensions and doubts that might resonate in these documents – "to recover problems more than to describe models" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 39). While this recovering of structuring antinomies is – at first – inevitably influenced by intuition and our prior knowledge of the object at hand (cf. 3.3), the researcher nonetheless cannot simply and arbitrarily himself define what is to be treated as the relevant context of interpretation. Rather, the structuring antinomies must be retrieved and carefully scrutinized on the basis of a wide and diverse range of historical material. At this point, Rosanvallon is once again in complete agreement with Skinner. Both oppose an anachronistic interpretation of history.

Analyzing the nowadays widely discussed crisis of political representation using a Rosanvallonian approach, one could – instead of presupposing a deductively generated, timeless ideal against which messy empirical realities of political representation can then be juxtaposed – rather take as a starting point the heated debate about different modes of representation which sprung up in mid-19th century Europe. By then, the old majoritarian 'the-winner-takes-it-all-model' of representation was widely criticized as a fraud, and proportional representation was presented as a remedy to the pitfalls of majoritarian voting systems. This controversy took place simultaneously in different countries and its echo can be discovered in political pamphlets, parliamentary debates on franchise reform and in academic and theoretical writings alike (cf. Rosanvallon 1998: 154ff.). All these sources reveal traces of an internal tension within the very concept of political representation – a tension between personal representation, built on accountability, and the visible representation of dissenting opinions, between the ideal of integration, giving a shared sense of identity to citizens, and the counter-ideal of a depiction of fragmented social reality. The trail of this opposition could then be followed in

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10 Raphael remarks that Rosanvallon has never been tempted by the idea of 'total history'. This is not completely true. At one point he actually claimed to pursue exactly this goal: "c'est vers 'une histoire totale' qu'il faut se diriger" (Rosanvallon 1995: 29). But this impulse is tamed by Rosanvallon's restricted focus on a limited number of structural tensions.

different historical directions – backwards to the French Revolution and its constitutional debates on popular sovereignty, and forward towards contemporary debates on populism. By this detour, ideally, one gains a deeper theoretical understanding of the complex developments that contributed to the recent feeling of crisis – a crisis which actually may have its deeper roots in the fact that ingenious political forms like parties which once managed to reconcile and balance *both* sides of the underlying antinomy are no longer functional (cf. the contribution of Felix Heidenreich in the present volume: Heidenreich 2019; for an analysis of the crisis of representation according to Rosanvallon see also Weymans 2007).

Following this pattern, Rosanvallon himself usually begins by introducing certain concepts that have come to be seen as problematic, tracing them back through history in order to subsequently unfold their internal non-identities, antagonisms and the centrifugal forces at work. This reconstruction of specific controversies, based on rich historical source materials, alternates with passages that take one step back, connecting the different parallel trajectories and identifying 'nodal points', thereby revealing the bigger historical motions and dialectics of the political (Rosanvallon 1986: 100). The image of the political resulting from this is that of an incessant, precarious work of exploration, continuously deciphering and balancing the ambiguities that set it in motion: "the object of such a history […] is to follow the thread of trial and error, of conflict and controversy, through which the polity sought to achieve legitimate form" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 38). According to Geneviève Verdo, this methodological approach itself has a 'centrifugal' spin. Seemingly stable and theoretically secured concepts burst into contradictory rationalities, and while at first these ambiguities might still appear to be reconcilable, in the ongoing process of research and also from book to book, Rosanvallon allegedly portrays them increasingly deeper and sharper (Verdo 2002: 698). The latter is only partially true, however, as Rosanvallon also takes into account learning processes and tentative solutions found by contemporaries. One example of such a solution would be the rationalized pluralism of party democracy, which bridged the gap between the abstract concept of 'the people' in constitutional law and the empirical diversity of opinions and identities. In other words: Rosanvallon's intentions are not merely deconstructive, but primarily 'reconstructive' (Schulz 2015: 155).

However, according to Rosanvallon, these temporary solutions, for which he crafts terms like 'democracy of equilibrium' (Rosanvallon 1998) or 'democracy of average' (Rosanvallon 2000), always remain precarious and experimental and, in the end, they need to be historicized themselves. His analysis does not lead to a generalizable conceptual synthesis, but rather provides a narrative reconstruction of explorative movements (cf. Rosanvallon 2008). Herein lies – to stick with the

example of representation – a big difference from more traditional accounts like the one offered by Urbinati (2006). In her widely read book on the subject, she reviews canonized ideas on representation and democracy from Rousseau, Kant and Sieyès to Condorcet in order to distill one coherent model of how representative democracy ought to be properly understood – a model that Rousseau would have already arrived at, had he not built his reasoning on conceptual mistakes.

3.3 The continuum of democratic experience

From Rosanvallon's perspective, writing history along such internal antinomies as have been explained above is an exercise in "empirical phenomenology", which leads to the "very heart of the political" itself (Rosanvallon 2006b: 44f.). This raises epistemological questions. Thorough scrutiny of the historical material and the famous 'veto-power of the sources', postulated by Koselleck, might very well prevent the most fallacious anachronisms. But, putting this aside, how are past presents really accessible to us? How can it be guaranteed that our interpretations actually reflect the political experience of contemporaries? Many historians would not dare even to make such claims. Rosanvallon defends them – with a bold reasoning, specifically grounded in Political Theory. Here, we can no longer omit that Rosanvallon is actually not concerned with a history of 'the political' in general. Rather, all of his works up to now exclusively focus on modern democracy. He has not published an account of ancient democracy nor a history of the *Ancien Régime*, even if he mentions both sometimes for illustrative purposes. Even Rosanvallon's book on the French state restricts itself to the period since 1789 (Rosanvallon 1990) – a deliberate neglect of absolutism, arguably a quite important period in the history of the centralized modern state. This omission is not due to insufficient knowledge of the material. Rather it is closely connected to methodological considerations; for it is the very fact that we today live in a democracy too, which, according to Rosanvallon, gives us access to past presents. He assumes that there exist "resonances between our experience of the political and that of the men and women who were our predecessors", vouching for the possibility of an emphatic understanding of history (Rosanvallon 2006b: 39; Rosanvallon 1986: 102). While the actual form of democracy changes over time, all of these changes can be understood as answers to closely related original problems. Therefore, it might be misleading to characterize Rosanvallon as an "archeologist of democracy" (Verdo 2002). For the archeologist merely discovers fragments and ruins of sunken worlds, which all scholarly knowledge of facts notwithstanding, ultimately remain strange and foreign. In contrast, Rosanvallon's method presupposes that the researcher is situated in the same field of problems as his object of research:

He conceives of history as a "quest in which we stay involved", a search that also is ours (Rosanvallon 1998: 362; cf. Rosanvallon 1986: 102, my transl.). In this sense, Rosanvallon's latest books, which focus more on contemporary transformations of democracy – the erosion of parliamentarianism, the rise of 'counter-democracy' (Rosanvallon 2006a) or a 'democracy of exercise' (Rosanvallon 2015a) – can be read as seamless continuations of one and the same research program. This assumption of a certain continuity of problems, inherent to democracy, sharply distinguishes Rosanvallon from Skinner, who has always insisted on the incommensurability of problems and situations. Here, Rosanvallon seems closer to Koselleck, who deliberately chose to restrict his research to the history of such concepts which, "facing forward to our time", are familiar to us in the present (Koselleck 2010: 9).

However, Rosanvallon links this argument more specifically to his particular view of democracy. To him, democracy is not only one form of government among many. Much to the contrary, democracy establishes a historically new way of how society as such can relate to itself. Following Claude Lefort, Rosanvallon conceptualizes democracy as the rise of a society that is no longer fully comprehensible as a whole, that cannot be governed anymore from one single point, and in which the identity of the people is continuously called into question (Rosanvallon 1998: 18). To Lefort, democracy is defined by the fact that the space of power must remain empty (Lefort 2001: 28). This 'emptiness' at the heart of democracy not only renders any embodiment of unity impossible, it also entails a new relation to history. People experience a radical uncertainty regarding the foundations of power, order and knowledge. Therefore, they increasingly have to understand society as a product of their own making (Lefort 2001: 30). Following this lead, Rosanvallon explicitly identifies the dissolution of a unified body politic and the rise of democracy as the two crucial moments informing his approach to history (Rosanvallon 1995: 29). The aporetic, tension-ridden character of 'the political' thus reveals itself to be not a timeless constant, but, rather, a consequence of the structure of modern democracy – where indeed the political always needs to be understood as an "experiment in freedom" (Rosanvallon 2006b: 36), therefore manifesting itself more often in the form of a question than an answer.[11]

On several occasions, Rosanvallon has also insisted on what he sees as an important difference between his and Lefort's interpretation of democratic openness

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11 The focus on democracy might also explain why Rosanvallon is largely ignoring important political events like the French colonial wars (cp. Raphael 2013: 17f.) – topics he probably considers external to democracy.

(or 'emptiness'). According to Rosanvallon, Lefort, strongly marked by the totalitarian perversions of communism, allegedly over-emphasized the necessity of liberal institutions that guarantee that the space of power remains empty. In contrast, Rosanvallon himself wants to focus more on the conceptual indeterminacy of democracy itself (Rosanvallon 2015b: 243f.; Rosanvallon/Schulz 2016: 117). This might not be as big a difference as Rosanvallon suggests, for the conceptual indeterminacy of democracy can only be fully experienced and processed if the basic openness of democratic politics is safeguarded by institutions, such as constitutions or a legally secured right to freedom of speech. Conversely, existing democratic institutions, even if initially the result of a rather flat opposition to totalitarianism, always have the potential to produce a 'surplus' of meaning and experiences that challenges and modifies the conception of democracy itself (one might think here of the German constitutional court, which was clearly founded in a strictly anti-totalitarian spirit, but since has become an important and distinct source of re-interpretations of democratic norms).

4. HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL NORMATIVITY

The assumption that there exists an element of historical continuity, rooted in a shared experience of democratic freedom and openness, inevitably raises the question of how history relates to the present. To what end, and for whom, do we write the history of the political? What can and what should this history tell us? And what relevance does political normativity have for this whole endeavor? The answer is threefold.

To begin with, Rosanvallon distances himself strongly from traditional political philosophy, which aspires to generate an exhaustive and fully consistent normative framework for thinking about politics. The latter kind of political philosophy, as exponents of which Rosanvallon names authors like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, is accused of merely 'parasitizing' the idea of democracy (Rosanvallon 2011b: 177). By defining a priori criteria of justice or reasonable discourse, the aforementioned thinkers allegedly formalize reality in an inappropriate way. According to Rosanvallon (2006b: 44), they reduce all political problems to an obstinate non-compliance of reality with predefined principles discovered by the philosopher, leaving no room for the practical experience of ambiguities. Whether this critique really does justice to Rawls and Habermas may remain undecided here. In any case, Rosanvallon himself certainly does not want his project to be mistaken for what, for the sake of simplification, might be called Post-Kantian

Political Philosophy. Rather, much like Foucault and Bourdieu, he associates himself with a certain re-orientation of French scholars since the 1970s, increasingly opposing the very idea that incontestable foundations of reasoning, upon which norms could be built, are attainable or even desirable (cf. Raphael 2013: 16).

This certainly does not mean that Rosanvallon retreats to a kind of scientistic neutrality that refrains from all normative or moral judgement. For him, the real choice is not between neutrality and normativity as such, but between a 'foundational' kind of normativity a priori ("normativité de départ") and a process-oriented, a posteriori kind of normativity ("normativité d'arrivée") (Rosanvallon 2011a: 346). Rosanvallon clearly associates his own research with the latter kind of normativity, defining it as an attempt to clarify and reflect on empirical experiences and practices, based on which tentative offers of orientation can then be made – and false generalizations be refused. At first sight, this appears to be a weak form of normativity, hardly going beyond Quentin Skinner's modest hope that writing history would open our eyes to the fact that the present too is "the product merely of our own contingent arrangements", thereby inviting us to discover the "essential variety of viable moral assumptions and political commitments" (Skinner 1969: 52f.). Following a similar line of argument, Rosanvallon criticizes a 'closed' universalism centered on one privileged model. He advocates a more 'open' universalism that is able to preserve the totality of experiences of democratic freedom (Rosanvallon 2008).

Thus, what Kari Palonen says about Skinner and Koselleck equally applies to Rosanvallon: The normative value inherent to their work has little to do with conventional moral recommendations. Rather, it lies in a new way of theorizing as such: "Conceptual history offers a chance to turn the contestability, contingency and historicity of the use of concepts into special instruments for conceptualizing politics." (Palonen 2002: 92) For instance, the insight into the inevitable democratic tension between a sociological understanding of the people and an understanding in terms of constitutional law (a point that Rosanvallon reiterates on several occasions) allows for a critique of all models which unilaterally privilege one dimension of the concept without considering the other. At the same time, this insight stimulates our "institutional imagination", raising the question of how this tension can be mediated and dealt with in the present (Raphael 2013: 12). Here, one can very well remain skeptical about some actual answers Rosanvallon himself gives to such a question – I would, by way of example, not share his optimism regarding new, post-electoral forms of democracy and legitimacy (Dormal 2016). But these are questions of political judgement, something every one of us ultimately has to do for themselves – to rephrase Quentin Skinner (1969: 52). Rosan-

vallon sees it as his most important task to provide historical and conceptual insights in order to inform the autonomous political judgement of citizens – while refusing, most of the time, the posture of the omniscient expert giving lessons to a passive audience (Rosanvallon 2015b: 250).

However, Rosanvallon does not content himself with the ironic praise of the unfinished and agonistic nature of things that is common with more postmodernist authors. His way of writing history is also strongly impregnated with specifically republican ideals. For instance, Rosanvallon has a positive, affirmative view of social 'progress', thereby opposing the postmodernist account of modern history as a mere process of refinement of the tools of oppression. Progress, as Rosanvallon understands it, does not only encompass the approximation towards a fixed ideal, but rather the attempt to overcome the separation between theory and practice as such (Rosanvallon 1995: 34). The basic idea even comes close to the famous 'Theses on Feuerbach' authored by the young Karl Marx. In opposition to Marxism, however, Rosanvallon does not assume that there is any epistemologically privileged class, party or other group, leading or embodying this progress. Rather, progress is a republican project that every citizen takes part in. From this it follows that the task of the historian or the philosopher cannot be strictly separated from the actual practice of democracy (Rosanvallon 1998: 363). Democracy not only *has* a history, it *is* itself a story that is constantly told and retold and to which everyone who produces knowledge about society contributes, be it by writing scientific books, novels or by lecturing (Rosanvallon 2006b: 38). It is precisely in this sense that Rosanvallon (2006b: 57) intends "to enrol […] in the line of all of the scholars who were the most indefatigable citizens, precisely through their works". For if shared experience allows us to understand democracy's past presents, as Rosanvallon assumes, then our own present thinking and writing, when trying to come to grips with these experiences of the past, is nothing less than another small step in the big endeavor initiated by the original promise of freedom (Rosanvallon 2006a: 32).

This is not to be confused with the posture of the intellectual activist, lending public authority to a particular ideology by means of his scientific reputation (Rosanvallon 1995: 36). Rather, for Rosanvallon, academic debates can be seen as a contribution to the general task of collectively deciphering and making sense of our shared world. At this point, another specific component of Rosanvallon's understanding of the political surfaces. He considers it essential to find forms of perceptions and representation of government and society that make the latter 'readable' to citizens. Rosanvallon (2006a: 313) explicitly speaks of a 'cognitive' dimension of the political. This aspect is also explored at large in the project *Rac-*

onter la vie, an initiative by Rosanvallon himself to collect autobiographical nar-
ratives in order to generate shared knowledge about society, and to counteract the
speechless fragmentation that has taken hold of the republic (Rosanvallon 2014).
While the general republican intention, keeping alive a 'concern for the world'
(Hannah Arendt) as its deeper motivation for research, is certainly honorable, this
specifically cognitive turn proposed by Rosanvallon is not without problems.
While it is true that the ability to cognitively appropriate the social world sur-
rounding them is a precondition for the practical and political empowerment of
citizens, in my view, one should take care not to reduce the political itself primar-
ily to a problem of proper knowledge or epistemology, thereby involuntarily ob-
scuring the more down-to-earth issues of actual distribution of political power – a
tendency that, here and there, surfaces in Rosanvallon's books.

5. CONCLUSION. FRANCE AS THE LABORATORY OF MODERN DEMOCRACY?

The artful combination of social and constitutional history, political theory and the
history of concepts offered by Rosanvallon is highly innovative. His various case
studies contribute to an enriching rediscovery and reassessment of the past as well
as the present of political concepts. This is acknowledged also by scholars who,
like myself, do not go along with all of Rosanvallon's conclusions. Influenced by
Claude Lefort, Rosanvallon's perspective on democracy is firmly grounded in Po-
litical Theory, in contrast to the approach of more conventional historians. To the
meticulous, empiricist historian, the notion of a sphere of 'the' political that can
be analyzed through its constitutive ambiguities and tensions might appear some-
what speculative. The same goes for the important assumption that there exists a
continuum of experiences of freedom, opened up by the democratic revolution,
which links past and present. But the Political Theorist, in contrast, is trained to
operate with such theoretical and epistemological assumptions, and to think of
ambiguities not as the result of inaccurate definitions, but as subjects of research
and further exploration. Rosanvallon applies this more philosophical kind of scru-
tiny and argument to the field of the history. In my view, this makes his approach
especially attractive and fruitful for Political Theorists, when compared to
Koselleck's more semantic orientation or Skinner's strictly historicizing research
centered on the intentions and contexts of single authors.

But is it really possible to separate a Rosanvallonian 'method' from his spe-
cific object of research? There is no denying that Rosanvallon's books focus not
on modern democracy in general, but mostly on French democracy in particular.

To be sure, he is quite aware of the danger of a national bias, requiring of himself a 'comparative curiosity' in order to complement the openness for internal tensions of democracy with an openness for the peculiarities of democratic experiences in different countries (Rosanvallon 1995: 35; cf. Rosanvallon 2008). In this vein, Rosanvallon's more recent studies regularly bring the United States, England and sporadically the German experience into the picture. Nevertheless, a good part of his studies, and especially the passages pertaining to the 19th century, still very strongly focus on the French case. This raises a question: could it be that Rosanvallon's method simply mirrors the particular French experience? Or to phrase the same question in a different way: Is it possible that *only* French democracy is characterized by inherent tensions, antinomies and ambiguities, resulting from its twofold heritage of absolutism and violent revolution, which for decades prevented a stable, consensual evolution? Should this be true, then Rosanvallon's approach of unfolding democracy's internal oppositions and contradictions could of course not be extended to other cases and would be pretty much worthless outside France.

Rosanvallon is fully aware of this problem. But he firmly insists that it is indeed France's particularly tormented historical experience which renders it a veritable laboratory of political modernity as such – not regarding the 'solutions', but the problems. He concedes that the French democratic experience is more contradictory and fragmented than, for instance, the development in England, the country of slow and pragmatic transition; but it is precisely for this reason that, according to Rosanvallon, the French experience encompasses the whole range of democracy's universal problems in their clearest and most concentrated form (Rosanvallon 1992: 48; Rosanvallon 2000: 36). Put this way, the French case is merely an extraordinary radical and chaotic instance of the universal 'riddle' of democracy – and therefore also of extraordinary interest to the researcher (cf. Mélonio 2015: 90f.).

The generalizability of Rosanvallon's historical approach ultimately rests on these premises, which I largely tend to share. But probably some critics will dismiss such reasoning as typically French arrogance and overestimation of one's own significance. In the end, this must be understood as yet another heuristic anticipation, the truth of which cannot be proven a priori, but which has to prove itself useful in practical research. Everything depends on whether a Rosanvallo-

nian 'democratic universalism of problems' (Rosanvallon 2008: 120) can fruitfully be pursued and substantiated outside the French context in actual research.[12] Can his approach help us find historically sound explanations and interpretations for the evolution of democracy outside France? I believe so; but admittedly, we cannot tell for sure at the moment. However, at a time when conventional history of ideas is pretty much dead academically and in desperate need of new impulses and paradigms, it seems more than worthwhile to give a Rosanvallonian history of the political a fair try.

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12 I myself have made such an attempt with regard to the history of democracy in Luxembourg – a country nevertheless still very strongly influenced by its neighbor France (cp. Dormal 2017).

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