Reading “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity”

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The painting that is Altdorfer's *Alexanderschlacht* in Koselleck's essay is a symbol and narrative tool which allows us readers to move intuitively through the outlines that form what Koselleck calls the plane of prophecy, its transformation into the plane of prognosis and then its eventual transition into the plane of accelerated time. Koselleck historicizes the present both through image and narrative, but most pertinent to my concern here, also through a tradition. By tradition I mean a continuity in conceptual lexicon which is able to chart historical change in the experience of time and space up to the current moment. In other words, I read Koselleck as posing the question of tradition when he at the very end of his essay, once again invokes the *Alexanderschlacht*. It is 1800, and now the *Alexanderschlacht* hangs in Napoleon's bathroom in Saint Cloud. Koselleck asks, "Did Napoleon sense the manner in which the history of the Occident was present in this painting?" Koselleck answers it in the speculative affirmative and goes on to invoke the possible presence of a Christian tradition even in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Koselleck writes, "It is possible Napoleon saw himself as a parallel to the great Alexander, and more. The power of tradition was so strong that the long-lost, salvational-historical task of the Holy Roman Empire shimmered through the supposedly new beginning of the [French Revolution]. Napoleon who had definitively destroyed the Holy Roman Empire, afterward married the daughter of the last emperor" (20) just as Alexander had married Darius' daughter after defeating the Persians. Napoleon later repented this act after his son from the marriage ousted him from his seat of power. Koselleck suggests that, though premeditated, Napoleon's marriage to the daughter of the last emperor of the Holy Roman Empire was perhaps no failure on Napoleon's part, for he was continuing an older tradition in line with Alexander. Koselleck reads the overthrow of Napoleon by a progeny that symbolized the defeat of the Holy Roman Empire as the potential for a long-lost tradition to re-emerge in strange ways into the modern historical process. By returning at the end to the *Alexanderschlacht* as a symbol for tradition, Koselleck asks, in what way will this painting be read, in what way will it find its way as a representation of the modern epoch despite its *temporal distanciation* from the present? Koselleck in this essay transforms the *Alexanderschlacht* into a palimpsest thickly layered by historical meanings. The epochs from the time the painting was made can be shown to have their own reading and hence time-consciousnesses.

When Koselleck asks "Did Napoleon sense the manner in which the history of the Occident was present in [the Alexanderschlacht]?" As a reader who is far too aware of his own historical tradition as being once referred to disparagingly as the Orient vis-a-vis the Occident, this question that Koselleck poses, invokes the following question. If we believe that there is a *historical difference* in the way modernity arrives in the colony and hence also configures our present, in what way is our space of expectation different from the one that Koselleck describes as the plane of accelerated time? I must qualify this question by saying that my historical tradition has often been described as an intellectual tradition which does not have a history, or rather has a cyclical form of time. Such cyclicality, when read as unthought repetition by colonial orientalists became a premise to discredit and disqualify it from possessing a sense of the past in the strict linear and statist sense. Another reason for Indic intellectual tradition to not have history, is the fact that there are no treatises, or sastras, which reflect on the nature of history as defined in the modern epoch. If we read Koselleck close enough, these assertions rather having truth value seem to be the assertions of an age that require historicization which takes into account their semantic and political coordinates. But the key question would be, from which point of vantage would this process be historicized? In other words, what would be the nature of a ‘space of expectation’ from where such a historicization can *begin*? Given the colonial interjection, reading Koselleck forces us to think in what way are we historical prognosticators ourselves? Not in the sense that Robespierre wanted us to believe that we are agents in search of our own destiny, but rather as the moderators of the historical-philosophical design. Koselleck reminds us, "It has been possible since Hegel's time to convey into historical reality fictions such as the thousand-year Reich or the classless society. This fixation on an end-state by participating actors, robbing them of their judgement. There is a need therefore for historical prognostication that goes beyond the rational prognoses of politicians and as the legitimate offspring of historical philosophy, can moderate the historical-philosophical design" (18). Koselleck says this in the context of a futureless future where the space of expectation has shrunk so dramatically by the late 18th century as compared to a world which awaited the realization of the End. Such a contraction of expectations of the End leaves actors in a state a finite "not yet" or abeyance, and hence a future without the anxiety of the End, instead temporally unbound fictions such as a thousand-year Reich or a classless society can structure a future, for the end is no longer bound by an ecclesiastical order.

Rather than focusing on an end-state, the *beginning* that Koselleck is able to mark at the turn of the 16th century with the Reformation given his rootedness in European history is more compelling for the *historical difference* with which I read this essay. The three hundred years between then and the French Revolution become junctures that mark the development of a historical timespace. Koselleck uses the phrase ‘plane of historicity,’ however, his use of the phrase ‘spaces of expectation’ tell us that the act of waiting, or expectation coagulates with the spatial boundaries of moral and political orders that come to define Europe’s transition from the medieval to early modernity and after. I read the traversal of differently constituted ‘spaces of expectation’ that Koselleck takes us through as a movement through moral and political shifts that share a *beginning*. These shifts not only describe the rise and fall of orders that structured Europe’s past, but rather, they are also able to express a difference in the way time and space was experienced. Such a narrative which shows us multiple shifts in the articulation and experience of timespace, I argue, is held together through a ecclesiastical *beginning* in Europe. To put it pithily, a reason why the transition from prophecy to prognosis, and then to accelerated time coheres is from a *beginning* that allows Koselleck to pose the question of modernity’s timespace as a question of tradition. Though I have used the phrase ‘reading with *historical difference* in mind,’ I have not explained it. What I mean here is the difference that is created when a certain moral/political order is said to have no history. Not only is this injunction falsifying but it also demands imitation. Such an injunction creates a sense that there is a “real” history and that other forms of invoking the the past are perhaps only images, or none at all. This distinction between “the real” and image, or presence and absence, is a question of history’s self-representation when two orthogonal ‘spaces of expectation’ encounter each other. Koselleck does not describe orthogonality across ‘spaces of expectation,’ but rather, his traversal of differing ‘spaces of expectation’ cohere by virtue of being within the bounds of a tradition.

Historical difference in Koselleck’s spatio-temporal semantics is path dependent, while the orthogonality in timespace, or historical difference which I describe is path independent, or in need of a point of departure. But even if we find a point of departure for the orthogonality I describe, it is crucial to not suggest an alternate path into modernity, but instead focus on the claim to an accelerated timespace. We have to realize here that such an accelerated timespace is derived from a certain initial condition which allows this narrative to describe modernity. Koselleck cites the invention of life-insurance, and intensive use of technology to claim an accelerated timespace. However the presence of the political in the modern is a powerful and open question for Koselleck. He suggests this by invoking Diderot, Tocqueville, and the uncertainty and unknowability around the possibility of intervention in the amorphous sphere of the political. This sphere is bound to us today by the presence of the nation-state where the ‘space of expectation’ is not only accelerated, but also vastly expanded and homogenizing. This acceleration of time can also be read as a spatialization of time, where space is seen as homogenous, and time taking on this tendency to cast experience as universal or the same. Within such a frame, the past is separated into antiquity, medieval, and the modern. Koselleck gives us points of departure for such a reading of the past. However, given the orthogonality of the historical difference that I described, antiquity, the medieval and the modern do not necessarily have to be serialized. For such a serialization is dependent on the beginning that Koselleck is able to choose. If I have a another point of departure, how will it alter my ‘space of expectation?’ Can another tradition alter my ‘space of expectation?’