

TRANSITION AS A HISTORICAL PROBLEM BETWEEN “ACHSENZEIT” AND “SATTELZEIT”

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What do we mean by “historical transition”? Escaping from the trap of considering every development in history as a “transition”, the presentation reflects on the problem of which ages could be understood as really bearing the meaning of being in a certain sense pivotal.

The focus is on the question of defining a “modern age”, which implies two different problems: 1) what does “modernity” mean; 2) which temporal extension do we assume proper for the age shaped by modernity.

Confronted with the unavoidable challenge of the theories about “postmodernism”, we could assume that the period from the late 15th century to the 70ies of the 20th century is the age in which some basic features of the western attitude in interpreting the world developed and finally were put up for discussion. Rationality is obviously the key concept in this context.

What remains to be investigated is if modernity could be seen as the fruit of a certain stage in the development of human history, a stage as many others, or if it marks a special and peculiarly valuable passage. Trying to answer this question we come across two different ideal types: that of “Sattelzeit” elaborated by R. Koselleck and that of “Achsenzeit” originally proposed by K. Jasper in 1949, but recently reinterpreted by social scientists as R.N. Bellah, H. Joas, Ch. Taylor.

The presentation offers a view which attempts to combine the idea that modernity was an axial age - despite the fact that we do not yet know what comes after - with the idea that modernity cannot be seen as homogenous epoch, but must be researched more closely to identify specific “Sattelzeit” markings as internal pivotal passages.