

Introduction: Time, History, and Political Thought

John Robertson

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Among statements of the obvious, few are likely to seem more obvious than that politics takes place in time and is subject to history. At its most banal – Harold Wilson’s ‘a week is a long time in politics’¹ – it has become a cliché. But it is also the premise of some of the most classic texts in the canon of Western political thought. Pre-eminent examples are Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and *Discourses*, where he argued that the key to success in politics, whether for individual rulers or for republics, lay in adapting to and taking advantage of time and circumstances. Alternatively, others have argued that politics will only be understood when recognised as subject to long-term economic and social forces: in this way, Hegel and Marx argued, politics served history’s purposes. Yet time and again – just as obviously – political thought has sought to escape the confines of time and history, and to present its findings as timeless, of universal application. If anything texts in this vein are even more classic, stretching as they do from Plato’s *Republic* in antiquity to John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* in the late twentieth century, by way of More’s *Utopia*, Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

It is not hard to see why a universal, timeless vision of politics should appeal: what humans have in common should trump their differences, and all should enjoy security, justice and equal rights. But again, the reverse is not hard to accept either. For notwithstanding those imputed commonalities, the historical record has repeatedly proved recalcitrant. Peoples, whether organised in states or connected by looser forms of association, have stubbornly asserted their political differences, appealing to the past or simply to current circumstances to justify their particularity. In the face of this binary, the standard scholarly response is to be more discriminating – to

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¹ Harold Wilson (1916–1995), Labour Party prime minister of the United Kingdom 1964–1970, 1974–1976; the remark is thought to have been first made in 1964.

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draw more distinctions in order to show that a simple opposition between the temporal and historical and the timeless and universal is too simple.

A first, crucial step is to recognise that time and history are separable concepts. Time is a concept no political theory can be without altogether. It is essential even to Hobbes' 'natural condition of mankind', where the crucial incentive to war between humans is fear of what others *will* do. Moreover while 'time' can be measured as uniform – clock time – it can be conceptualised in very different ways according to perspective of the thinker or the object of enquiry, yielding distinct 'temporalities', or time regimes. In one view of politics, a week is a long time; in another, not at all. The temporality of politics conceived as a form of social organisation, for example, is unlikely to correspond with that of revolutions; and different systems of law are likely to have distinct temporalities.

For an argument to be historical, by contrast, it must appeal to some record of human experience, a documentary or material residue from which historians can reconstruct what they suppose happened 'in fact'. A historical political argument is one which refers, explicitly or by allusion, to such 'facts', or to the narratives by which historians have connected them. The distinction was clearly drawn by Rousseau, in the prologue to the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men* (1755), in which he began by 'setting aside all the facts', in favour of 'hypothetical and conditional reasonings, better suited to elucidate the Nature of things'. The account he proceeded to give of original, natural human equality was unavoidably temporal, but made no appeal even to what Rousseau took to be the oldest recorded history, that of the Bible.² A further complication is that the histories of interest to political thinkers have been of more than one kind. What is assumed to be the most relevant and most cited form of history in European political thought is the classical narrative, devoted to war, diplomacy and power struggles within communities, and exemplified by Herodotus and Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus, and later by Guicciardini and Gibbon. But political thought has also emerged from and engaged with many other kinds of history, including sacred, legal, social and natural history. The different kinds of history have in turn been informed by contrasting assumptions about how events or more structural developments unfold, whether cyclically or in a linear, progressive or even purposive direction, and by the ascription of different temporal rhythms or durations (short, medium or long) to the layers of human activity.

Time and its temporalities, history and the narratives by which it is told, thus form a triad with political thought, the weightings of whose components are constantly shifting. Political thinkers may often have sought refuge from the constraints of time and history in the universal; but none has dispensed altogether with temporality,

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes III Du contrat social, Écrits politiques*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris, 1964), 132–3. Translation by Victor Gourevitch, *The Discourses and other early political writings* (Cambridge, 1997), 132. Although as Silvia Sebastiani points out in Chapter 9 in this volume, Rousseau proceeded to let 'the facts' back in through his notes.

and even the most determined to exclude history have known that it will still be camped at theory's gates.

Among political scientists, time is now taken ever more seriously as a dimension of politics.³ For their part, historians of political thought have certainly not neglected either time or history in reconstructing their subject: the quantity of references to work which engages with them, both in this introduction and in the substantive chapters to follow, testifies the contrary. Yet there is a case for suggesting that these dimensions of political thought might profitably be paid more attention. One barrier to doing so may derive from what is otherwise a strength of the history of political thought: its proximity to political theory and political philosophy as they are currently practised. As Annabel Brett puts it, it is an inherent feature of the history of political thought that its very concern with the 'political' 'pulls' it into political thought itself, and hence into its present concerns.⁴ The pull is liable to be felt most naturally and urgently by historians of recent political thought. The closer they are to the present, the easier it becomes for them to contribute to discussion of the issues whose genesis they have been studying: a theoretical pay-off from historical enquiry is visibly within reach. But the same pull may affect the history of political thought of any period, shaping its narratives to yield implications of relevance to the present. There is nothing inherently wrong in this tendency: the scope to make a theoretical or philosophical contribution is what distinguishes the history of political thought of any period from other forms of historical enquiry. Nevertheless, a problem arises if the present concerns of political theory or philosophy over-determine understanding of the roles temporality and history have played in past political thinking.

The problem is not that the theorist or philosopher may have a natural preference for the universal to the neglect of the historical. If anything, the greater danger is the opposite: a reductive temptation to use history as a 'reality check', exposing the illusions within the languages and the concepts deployed by those in power to legitimate their rule. In this guise, history is treated as external to theory and a test of its usage. Cast as 'political realism', this is a powerful instrument of critique. It draws inspiration from classic historical treatments of politics, not least the 'steely realism' of Thucydides. But its sharpest edge is turned to the present, where it has been applied with telling effect to undercut the liberal universalism of Rawls' theory of justice. Within a decade of its publication, it is argued, a theory of justice designed

³ As a sample: Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time. History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (Princeton and Oxford, 2004); Elizabeth F. Cohen, *The Political Value of Time. Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice* (Cambridge, 2018); Klaus H. Goetz, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Time and Politics* (Oxford, online publication 2021). DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190862084.013.35

⁴ Annabel Brett, 'Between history, politics and law: history of political thought and history of international law', in Annabel Brett, Megan Donaldson and Martti Koskeniemi, eds., *History, Politics, Law. Thinking through the International* (Cambridge, 2021), 19–48, at 21. I am indebted to the author for the opportunity to read this paper before its publication: its conception of what is distinctive to the history of political thought has shaped the argument of this introduction.

to be proof against historical change and even to shield its subjects from the future had been rendered anachronistic by the reality of economic crisis.⁵ The problem here is that a politics which appeals to history as its external arbiter is also its narrator, telling a story which it anticipates its readers will accept. The critical advantages of such a 'realist' historical perspective are less apparent in the study of earlier periods, where the reconstruction of 'reality' is less intuitive, and the thinkers' own conceptions of time and history may seem remote from ours. In that longer perspective, it becomes clearer that to oppose history to theory in the name of a reality check is to miss how political theories have themselves constructed time and history, and how the histories so constructed (and their accompanying temporalities) have enabled different visions of political life. While no historian of political thought can (or should) deny the pull of the present, the resort to history in the name of realism is liable to curtail rather than facilitate enquiry into how relations between politics, time, and history have been conceived.

Even as some tendencies within political theory may be narrowing the space for time and history, however, the study of history itself has been undergoing what has been characterised as a 'temporal turn'. Predicated on the emergence of a new conception of 'History', the temporal turn has potentially far-reaching implications for the understanding of 'modern' politics. The inspiration for this 'turn' has been the thinking of the German historian and philosopher of history Reinhart Koselleck, as developed in a succession of essays between the 1960s and the 1990s.⁶ In outline, Koselleck's thesis was as follows. Between 1750 and 1850, a period Koselleck initially and influentially labelled the *Sattelzeit*, literally 'saddle time', there was a transformation in what Europeans understood by 'history'. Before 1750, time was taken to be stable, so that history followed a cyclical pattern. What had happened in war and politics was recorded in histories (*Historie*), and precisely because time was recursive, these histories also served as exemplars of military and political conduct, *historia magistra vitae*. By 1850, however, 'History' (*Geschichte*) was understood to possess a conceptual identity separate from the works in which it was written, and to pursue a linear, progressive course of development, in which time was accelerating.

⁵ As in Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge, 2001); and in more compelling detail, Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice. Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton and Oxford, 2019); see esp. 172–203, on the contortions required for Rawls to shield his subjects from a concern with the future. For comment on varieties of realism: Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears, 'The new realism: from *modus vivendi* to justice', in J. Floyd and M. Stears, eds., *Political Philosophy versus History?* (Cambridge, 2011), 177–205; and on 'exposure' as its default trope: Brett, 'Between history, politics and law', 34.

⁶ The initial set of essays was published in German in 1979 and translated into English by Keith Tribe as *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1985). There have been two further translated collections which do not correspond directly to German originals: *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, by Todd S. Presner et al. (Stanford, 2002) and *Sediments of Time. On Possible Histories*, by Sean Franzel and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (Stanford, 2018). References to specific essays later in this volume.

At the centre of this transformation lay the French Revolution, which had engendered a new idea of political possibility, revolution as the overthrow of existing social relations, and a new ‘horizon of expectation’, in which the prospect of radical change was the political norm. Koselleck compared the new sense of revolutionary expectation to that of Christian eschatology, anticipating the end of the world; reinvigorated by the Reformation, eschatology had been the main threat to the stability of time in the pre-modern world. But after the French Revolution the anticipation was of transformation in this world, gradually extending across the globe. To the new conception of ‘History’ it had been easy to attach normative purpose: history could confidently be equated with progress towards a chosen goal, whether freedom, nation-statehood, socialism or communism. Such, Koselleck argued, was the history and temporality of the *Neuzeit*, a term readily translated into English as ‘modernity’.

Since the early 2000s, Koselleck’s thesis has stimulated an intensifying debate among historians, diffusing the idea of a ‘temporal turn’ in the discipline. An important early intervention was made by the French historiographer François Hartog. Detecting disillusion with modernity, Hartog diagnosed the cause as a pervasive ‘presentism’ which views the past as a subject for commemoration rather than critical understanding and a basis for political action. In response, he proposed that historians think in terms of ‘regimes of historicity’, which would allow for different historical paths to modernity.⁷ More recently, Hartog has returned to the problem of presentism, connecting it to a loss of expectation in a future threatened by climate change. Modifying his earlier response, Hartog now suggests a return to thinking of time simply as *Chronos*, abandoning the temporality of *Kairos*, or expectation, which Christianity took over from the Greeks and used to characterise the period of waiting for the final *Krisis* of Christ’s return. Modernity’s ‘horizon of expectation’, Hartog would seem to be arguing, should be sacrificed to the crisis of the Anthropocene, leaving lineal time, accounted for by chronology, as the least threatening temporality in which to comprehend climate change.⁸ Hartog’s theses have in turn stimulated debate in their own right, notably in the collection edited by Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, *Rethinking Historical Time* (2019).⁹

Others have sought to apply insights deriving from the temporal turn to the politics of the past. Notable among these has been Christopher Clark, whose *Time and Power* (2019) examines the contrasting attitudes to historical temporality adopted by

⁷ François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris, 2003), translated by Saskia Brown as *Regimes of Historicity. Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York, 2015). For a similar lament over ‘presentism’, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York, 2014).

⁸ François Hartog, ‘*Chronos, Kairos, Krisis: the genesis of western time*’, *History and Theory*, 60:3 (2021), 425–39, with a series of responses, 440–68.

⁹ Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, eds., *Rethinking Historical Time, New Approaches to Presentism* (London and New York, 2019). For an argument convergent with Hartog’s rehabilitation of chronology, Helge Jordheim, ‘Return to chronology’, at 43–56.

four German regimes since the seventeenth century, those of Frederick William the Great Elector, Frederick II, Bismarck, and the Third Reich. Taking cues from both Koselleck and Hartog, Clark exchanged the terms of the latter's concept to focus on the 'historicity of regimes', to yield a study of 'chronopolitics', or how understandings of time and change shape political decision-making.¹⁰ A similar interest motivates the collection with the reversed title *Power and Time* (2020), edited by Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley, although they prefer the term 'chronocenosism' to capture the potential for conflict between different political and legal temporalities.¹¹ The appeal of the 'temporal turn' is clear, but as the proliferation of 'chrono'-concepts perhaps implies, its outcomes are still open.

As Edelstein and others suggest, there is no reason why the temporal turn should not also stimulate fresh thinking about time and history in the history of political thought. To do so, however, requires returning to the theses of Koselleck on which the turn was founded, since these provided not only a re-conception of 'History' but a new approach to the history of modern political thought. For this purpose, the next section (2) of this introduction will look more closely at Koselleck's account of the politics of 'modern' time, examining both the intellectual history through which it was demonstrated, and the meta-historical assumptions required to sustain it. The potential of Koselleck's history, it will be argued, is evident in his account of the new temporality of revolution; but the thesis as a whole remains hostage to an over-determined concept of 'modernity'.

Instead of developing the Koselleckian version of the temporal turn, therefore, I argue in the following section (3) that historians of political thought would do better to harness the methodological and historiographical resources which already exist within their discipline. In particular, I shall return to the suggestion that political thought is best studied through its languages rather than its concepts. As John Pocock has sought to demonstrate, thinking in terms of languages is particularly well adapted to grasping the different ways in which time and history have been put to work in political thought. While a single volume cannot cover every possible way of doing so, the subsequent section (4) will identify as many as six forms of temporal-historical political thinking which are the subject of contributions later in this collection. Each of these will be outlined, and the specific contributions to this volume introduced by their relation to them. As I emphasise in conclusion (5), the resulting picture of the ways in which time, history, and politics have been inter-related is necessarily selective; others might be added. Nevertheless, what is covered in this volume is already much richer than what is suggested by a focus on the

¹⁰ Christopher Clark, *Time and Power. Visions of History in German Politics from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Princeton and Oxford, 2019). The Introduction provides a densely referenced account of the 'temporal turn'. For 'chronopolitics', 14 and note 36.

¹¹ Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley, eds., *Power and Time. Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago and London, 2020).

advent of the ‘modern’ alone, while demonstrating that history can serve many more purposes for political thinkers than a simple reality check. Rather, the contributions to this volume demonstrate how rich and varied have been the possibilities opened for political thought by different conceptions of time and history.

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The essentials of Koselleck’s account of the accelerating time of ‘modernity’ have already been sketched above. But there was more to that account than the standard summary reveals; to test its significance for the history of political thought, both the story he was telling and its particular conceptual character need amplification. The story recounted in the essays collected in *Futures Past* and successor volumes is clearly connected to the one he had told in his first book, originally published in 1959, and eventually translated as *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*.¹² There Koselleck had characterised Enlightenment philosophy as an expression of frustration with the absolutist state, and with the Hobbesian principles by which absolutism was justified. Designed to enable the sovereign to enforce toleration and prevent the renewal of religious war, the Hobbesian concept of the state had stood in the way of the *philosophes*’ aspirations for radical social and political change. In response, the *philosophes* and their German counterparts, the *Illuminati*, had put morals before politics, and articulated their goals in the abstract, utopian terms of natural law. On this basis, they envisaged an undermining of the absolutist state, a prognosis of revolution which they concealed within a philosophy of history as progress. Combining these intellectual commitments with an approach to politics modelled on the secretive rituals of Freemasonry, the ‘*prophètes philosophes*’ of the Enlightenment had successfully precipitated the overthrow of the *ancien régime*.

In that first book, Koselleck was telling a certain story, one with obvious echoes of Tocqueville’s *L’ancien régime et la révolution* (1856), and even of the Counter-Revolutionary thesis of a ‘*philosophe* conspiracy’ (in its French and German versions). Intellectual responsibility for the French Revolution was attributed to a utopian willingness to slight the role of the state in maintaining order, in favour of a transformation of society in the name of moral absolutes. It was this story which informed Koselleck’s essay ten years later on ‘Historical criteria of the modern concept of revolution’, which contended that after 1789 the idea of ‘revolution’ had become a ‘collective singular’, uniting in itself the course of all the individual revolutions that followed the French. Built into this modern concept of revolution were both an acceleration of political time and, through declarations of rights, the

¹² Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford, New York and Hamburg, 1988), trans. of *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg and Munich, 1959).

expectation that political and social revolution would coincide. Further features of the concept included the implication that it would be global in ambition and ‘permanent’ until that ambition had been realised.¹³ Koselleck connected the new concept with the transformation by which History itself had become singular, formalising the junction he had identified in the minds of the *philosophes* between a prognosis of revolution and a philosophy of history. Triggering a new sense of accelerating time, the experience of revolution had reinforced the idea that History could be progressive and purposive in its own right.¹⁴ Koselleck was reluctant to identify this concept of ‘History’ with ‘Historicism’, perhaps to avoid associating it with the historiographical story told by Meinecke, among others;¹⁵ but at this stage he, too, was clearly advancing claims that belong within the history of political thought and historiography.

As such, evidence to substantiate Koselleck’s claims could be sought in the writings of individual thinkers: examples were his discussions of the political thinking of Lorenz von Stein (1815–1890), and of the historical philosophy of J. C. Chladenius (1710–1759) and his German successors down to Hegel.¹⁶ But the focus of his historical study was not authors, texts, or even languages; it was concepts. The history of concepts, *Begriffsgeschichte*, realised in the multi-volume, collaborative lexicon edited with Otto Brunner and Werner Conze, entitled the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1972–1997), was given the task of demonstrating the wholesale intellectual transformation of political and historical thinking which Koselleck was convinced had taken place between 1750 and 1850. Its ‘central problematic’, Koselleck wrote in his Introduction to Volume I, ‘is the dissolution of the old society of orders and estates, and the development of the modern world. ... Its research is meant to reveal what is distinctively *modern* about the way we conceptualise political and social life.’¹⁷ As successive volumes of the lexicon appeared, Koselleck clarified the possibilities of the methodology: in particular there was no supposition that concepts were fixed in meaning. Conceptual history was as much concerned with concepts’ diachronic development as with their synchronic articulation. Concepts might have their own, or indeed more than one, temporality. In the layering of temporalities lay the possibility, much emphasised by Koselleck, of the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, the opportunity for conceptual usages from different times, or which implied different temporalities of implementation, to be combined in a specific

¹³ Koselleck, ‘Historical criteria of the modern concept of revolution’ (original publication in German in 1969), *Futures Past*, 39–54.

¹⁴ Koselleck, ‘Modernity and the planes of historicity’ (1968), *Futures Past*, 3–20.

¹⁵ See Chapter 12 later in this volume, Waseem Yaqoob, ‘After Historicism’, 274–77, for an assessment of Koselleck’s relation to this tradition.

¹⁶ ‘Historical prognosis in Lorenz von Stein’s Essay on the Prussian Constitution’ (1965), ‘Perspective and temporality: a contribution to the historiographical exposure of the historical world’ (1977), *Futures Past*, 57–69, 130–55.

¹⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*’, translated by Michaela Richter, *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 6:1 (2011), 1–37, quotation at 8.

political present.¹⁸ For all the methodological sophistication of conceptual history, however, its deployment was predicated on an explicit periodisation: its subject was the history of the political thought of modern times.¹⁹

For Koselleck this was by no means only a matter of intellectual history. Keen to align *Begriffsgeschichte* with the new social history of the 1960s,²⁰ Koselleck argued that the modern understanding of time had derived from a broader social experience. Underpinning this claim was a concept of ‘experience’ as informed by ‘reality’, which exists independently of and prior to language, and which language is always struggling to master.²¹ Thus he argued that the political experience of the French Revolution had been reinforced by the industrial revolution, specifically the discovery and diffusion of steam power. It was ‘technological–industrial progress’ which had ‘denaturalized’ time, transforming it into a generalised experience of acceleration. The time of the *Neuzeit*, of ‘modernity’, therefore, was not simply an intellectual construction; it was a social mentality, which made it possible for all to share in the political expectations associated with revolution, on a global scale.²²

There was still another, explicitly ‘metahistorical’, layer to Koselleck’s argument, underpinning both experience and language. This he characterised as ‘historical anthropology’. It covered the three ‘anthropological givens’ of human experience: the lifecycle of birth and death, the distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, and the hierarchy of above and below, exemplified by the master–slave relationship. These were the conditions of all possible human histories, circumscribing the scope of linguistic representation.²³ Likewise metahistorical were two concepts of Koselleck’s own coining, which were not attributed to the *Sattelzeit*, but which were crucial to his explanation of what happened during that period: the ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’. The ‘space of experience’ comprises the totality of past times; when time is regular (before it began to accelerate), the space

¹⁸ Koselleck, ‘Introduction to the GG’, 16–22; also ‘Sediments of time’ (*Zeitschichten*) (1994), *Sediments of Time*, 3–9. See also the comments by Keith Tribe, ‘Intellectual history as *Begriffsgeschichte*’, in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, eds., *A Companion to Intellectual History* (Chichester, 2016), 61–71, on the extent to which realisation of the aims of the GG depended on the availability of contributors and the time they could devote to research.

¹⁹ The extent to which the periodisation of the modern is at odds with the concept of multiple temporalities is debated by commentators: Helge Jordheim, ‘Against periodization: Koselleck’s theory of multiple temporalities’, *History and Theory*, 51:2 (2012), 151–71; Juhan Hellema, ‘Koselleck on modernity, *Historik*, and layers of time’, *History and Theory*, 59:2 (2020), 188–209; also Sabina Loriga, ‘Préface à la nouvelle édition’, Reinhart Koselleck, *Le futur passé* (Paris, 2015), 7–23.

²⁰ Koselleck, ‘*Begriffsgeschichte* and social history’ (1972), *Futures Past*, 73–91.

²¹ Koselleck, ‘Linguistic change and the history of events’ (1989), *Sediments of Time*, 137–57. Consistent with this, Koselleck explicitly rejected the methodologies of ‘meaning and experience’, ‘text and context’ which give priority to language, 137.

²² Koselleck, ‘Does history accelerate?’ (first delivered, 1976; first published, 1985), *Sediments of Time*, 79–99, esp. 82–93.

²³ Koselleck, ‘Linguistic change’, *Sediments of Time*, 138–41, 151.

of experience ‘leaps over time’. Once time was experienced as accelerating, however, that space was superseded: there was a new, constantly expanding ‘horizon of expectation’, which refused to be confined to the space of experience. This was the time of modernity, the temporality which made it possible to conceptualise a political expectation of permanent, global revolution.²⁴

Koselleck’s thesis concerning the time and politics of the *Neuzeit*, therefore, was a multi-layered construction: what began as an intellectual–historical narrative was re-told through histories of selected concepts, underpinned by a claim about a larger economic and social reality, and framed with the aid of metahistorical propositions derived from anthropological pre-givens. Much more than a history, it was a ‘Theory’, a philosophy of History.²⁵ What the thesis did not have was any positive normative implication. On the contrary, Koselleck insisted in a late essay, the progressive purposes ascribed to ‘History’ in the nineteenth century had been exposed as meaningless, if not absurd, by the events of the twentieth. For Germany in particular, the outcome of ‘modern’ history had been the catastrophe of the two world wars, whose normative meaninglessness was epitomised by the battles of Verdun and Stalingrad, and its normative absurdity by the Holocaust.²⁶ But Koselleck did not want to tie his argument exclusively to the German context. The legacy of the *Neuzeit*, of modernity in general, of its accelerating temporality and its politics of revolutionary expectation, was a positive absence of value. Consistent with this, Koselleck distanced himself sharply from intellectual historians who supposed that study of past thought involved engagement with moral choices.²⁷

The starkness of this conclusion seems to have been ignored by the majority of historians interested in his thesis of the accelerating time of modernity. This may be explained by a desire to get away from late twentieth-century debates over the German catastrophe and the Holocaust. It may also reflect the desire of many historians to defend modernity from the postmodern critique, which seemed to threaten their hold on historical truth. Whatever the reason, historians have since 2000 been remarkably tenacious in their commitment to ‘modernity’. Among intellectual historians, those studying Enlightenment have made a point of defending their subject’s equivalence

²⁴ Koselleck, “‘Space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation’: two historical categories’ (1976), *Futures Past*, 267–88.

²⁵ Again, the balance between history and philosophy is debated by commentators. For Frank R., Ankersmit, ‘Koselleck on “Histories” versus “History”’, or, historical ontology versus historical epistemology’, *History and Theory*, 60:4 (2021), 36–58, it is only as ontology that Koselleck’s philosophy transcends its Eurocentric historical premises.

²⁶ Koselleck, ‘On the meaning and absurdity of history’ (1997), also ‘History, law and justice’ (1986), both in *Sediments of Time*, respectively 177–96, and 117–36, at 123–4. I am grateful to Clara Maier for explaining the context and significance of these essays to me.

²⁷ Hence, presumably, Koselleck’s brusque description of Quentin Skinner as ‘a conventional historian concerned with a load of normative concepts’, quoted by Roberto Breña, ‘Tensions and challenges of intellectual history in contemporary Latin America’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 16:1 (2021), 89–115, at 98–9.