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Review: WHAT TYPE OF HISTORIAN? CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF
CONCEPTS: A COMPLEX LEGACY AND A RECENT CONTRIBUTION

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WHAT TYPE OF HISTORIAN?
CONCEPTUAL HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF CONCEPTS:
A COMPLEX LEGACY AND A RECENT CONTRIBUTION

POLITICAL CONCEPTS AND TIME: NEW APPROACHES TO CONCEPTUAL HISTORY. Edited by Javier Fernández Sebastián. Santander, Spain: Cantabria University Press-McGraw Hill, 2011. Pp. xix, 442.

ABSTRACT

Javier Fernández Sebastián's edited collections of essays, *Political Concepts and Time*, is both a critical homage to the monumental work of Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) and an important contribution to the methodology of history-writing. Centered on the polysemic nature of concepts, which are read as “vehicles for thought” studied in their pragmatic and communicative applications in society, *Political Concepts and Time* provides a stimulating analysis of the role, weight, and future of conceptual history.

Its thirteen essays offer an account of problems, questions, and debates on the interplay of words and concepts, meaning and historical change, context and discourse. They endeavor to clarify the complicated and perennially unresolved relationship between theory and practice. In order to do so, Fernández Sebastián has assembled a scholarly composite and broadly international group of specialists from a variety of disciplines and research fields.

With the intellectual legacy of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* looming large, this book rethinks the ways in which not just historians but also social scientists and philosophers study the past as the expression of contingent, ever-changing, and revocable semantic units shaping the culturally plural worlds we inhabit. Informed by the idea that history is porous, *Political Concepts and Time* also deals with the perhaps obvious but no less challenging issue of our approach to time as everyday experience and through its representation(s).

Together with exploring the volume's specific historical topics, this essay will highlight some of its limitations and, above all, will respond to its criticism of intellectual history. The following pages will thus argue the case for the latter methodological perspective by reflecting on the type of historian it delineates. Claiming that in their investigation of past meanings intellectual historians make use of *creative imagination*, the essay will suggest that this model of history-writing leads to a better understanding of multiple sources and that it might ultimately help overcome some of the inconsistencies and often simplistic divisions between various branches of the historiographical tree. In particular, a small proposal to reconcile conceptual and intellectual history will be advanced.

Keywords: conceptual history, *Begriffsgeschichte*, concepts, time, language, intellectual history, modernity, *Sattelzeit*

That historians carry out their research in archives might be obvious. What is often less so is the content of their toolbox: what kind of instruments do scholars use? What type of material do they work on? How do they “go about their business” of trying to make sense of the past? The answers to these questions are generally

provided by methodological studies. Javier Fernández Sebastián's edited collection of essays on conceptual history represents an instance of how fruitful such an activity can be. This ambitious work has as its two kernels of analysis "language and time" as "essential" interpretive historical categories. Relying on Reinhart Koselleck's (1923–2006) monumental oeuvre and his historiographical edifice of *Begriffsgeschichte*,¹ *Political Concepts and Time* illustrates the intellectual wealth of conceptual history by focusing on "contingency" and "acceleration" in connection with the temporal dimension of modern politics; modernity-shaping concepts such as "power," "ideology," and "self"; semantic change; "iconology" and "memory" as hermeneutical devices with which to decode the past; "comparative" and "cultural" history (6-7). Another hallmark of this project is its being "interdisciplinary" (4) (or "transdisciplinary"), and "transnational" (15).

The thirteen essays (divided into three parts)² offer an account (sometimes a restatement) of problems, questions, and debates on the interplay of words and concepts, meaning and historical change, context and discourse. They endeavor to clarify the complicated and perennially unresolved issue of the link(s) between theory and practice, interpretations and factual world, linguisticity and historical experience. A valuable addition to them is Christian Meier's intellectually and biographically informative commemorative speech dedicated to Koselleck. This piece is followed by a second appendix detailing the goals of the European Conceptual History Project in which some of the contributors are involved. Underscoring the central role of "contingency," "indeterminacy," "fragility," and "openness" against all metanarratives and teleological drives toward "rationalization," "modernization," and "progress" (436), the contributors to the volume point out that conceptual history illuminates "the complex relationships between social and political change and semantic innovation" (436) in diachronic and synchronic terms. What primarily counts in this interpretive scheme is, therefore, to seize how and why certain concepts emerge(d), develop(ed), and—no less significantly—decline(d). Concepts are thus seen as "factors of change" as much as "indicators" of such change (5, 210, 426): they are read as "'vehicles for thought'" (35) studied in their pragmatic and communicative applications in society.

Claiming that history is essentially porous and denaturalized, *Political Concepts and Time* sets forth an informative body of theoretical reflections on the multifaceted interactions between "language, politics and history" (6). As Kari Palonen puts it, "[c]onceptual history not only stresses the role of politics for history; it also provides an insightful framework for political thinking" (179). And it is through "the contingency of activity" (181), whereby politics is an activity made of actions that in themselves could have been different, that Koselleck's conceptual history approach to political thinking might be thoroughly grasped.

For all their positive assessment of Koselleck's historical interpretations and theoretical positions, some essays do not refrain from a healthy critique of his

1. Together with Koselleck, Otto Brunner and Werner Conze are the other two historians behind this late 1960s historiographical school. Their reference work is *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–1997).

2. Part I is titled *Conceptual History and Neighbouring Disciplines*; Part II: *Temporalizing Experiences and Concepts*; Part III: *On the Historical Semantics of Modern Times*.

theory of modernity as too a-contextually overarching. His metaconcept of *Sattelzeit* (1750–1850) as well as the four key concepts fixing the semantic changes engendered by the advent of the modern, namely “temporalization,” “ideologization,” “democratization,” and “politicization” (210),³ advance a reductive reading of the processes of modernization that occurred in and to different societies at various times in history. It is by considering them as “hypotheses” (210) and not as truths that these categories become useful ways of thinking about historical change. Likewise, Koselleck’s insistence on “singular concepts” is replaced by broader conceptual units such as “theoretical constellations, semantic fields and conceptual networks” (7). This choice is motivated by a more ambitious attempt at capturing the comprehensive dimension within which historical meaning is given form and, in turn, shapes “social knowledge” (8, 38).

Inevitably a partial selection, four essays deserve particular attention. Pim den Boer tackles the relationship between national cultures and transnational concepts, warning of the risks posed to intellectual integrity by nationalistic agendas through time. Arguing that *Begriffsgeschichte* can be an excellent bridge between different conceptual horizons, den Boer nonetheless suggests abandoning “a predestined saddle-time” perspective in favor of a “flexible periodization and a plurality of conceptual ridges” (211). Equally perceptive is his call for attention to the fact that, while “formal empires have disappeared” (and with them the language(s) that accompanied colonial enterprises), “informal empires [class, societal conventions, unwritten social codes] remain or are even built-up openly by economic developments and social networks” (213). Den Boer shows how conceptual comparative studies are extremely useful in order “to understand contemporary political sensibilities” (214) such as the value and meaning of democracy, constitutional arrangements in the EU, class-divisions, and more.⁴ In this respect, Koselleck’s lesson emerges in its full strength in that it reminds us that to study concepts created by men and women not only in relation to past and present experiences but also in conjunction with “expectations for the future” (218) holds great importance not just in the sometimes rarefied scholarly world but in the larger framework of society too. Likewise, João Feres Júnior defines Koselleck’s idea of “community” as “post-metaphysical” (231) in that it is founded on realism (how communities are) and not on abstract normativism (how communities ought to be). Thus, this definition of community implies some anchoring in a here and now made of political, social, and cultural intercourse between concrete agents through “language and institutions” (231). The mooted point is, however, to establish whether such a unity has at its center the horizon of the nation-state or a more transnational dimension as argued by den Boer.

Another highlight in the volume comes from Faustino Oncina Coves’ incisive piece on memory, iconology, and the function of conceptual history in defining

3. For other references in the book to these four Koselleckian “working hypotheses” (210), see also, for example, 155, 161.

4. Implied in this view is the conviction—clearly expressed in the Introduction—that “a comparative historical semantics of civilizations” might conduce to a positive “rapprochement” and to a mutually fruitful understanding “between people belonging to the different regions and cultural systems which coexist in our world” (1-2).

their complex association with modernity. Taking the delicate controversies (in which Koselleck became involved) of the *Neue Wache*—the Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny—and the monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin, Oncina Coves convincingly delineates how collective memory, its aesthetic representation, and the issue of national celebrations of the dead (victims and perpetrators) are deeply intertwined not simply as subjects of historical research, but most importantly as key features of what he calls “a public acceptance of historical reasoning” (328). Especially fascinating is Oncina Coves’ argument that the visualization of death presents “a restricted range of [sculptural, aesthetic] motifs” (317) through which memory can be illustrated.

Insightful and thematically rich is then Javier Fernández Sebastián’s account of the interplay between “crisis of time” and “crisis of language” (374) as characteristics of modernity. Through an analysis of various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources, Fernández Sebastián shows how changes in the perception of time occurred together with changes in the terminological realm of political and social concepts. The acceleration of time caused by revolutionary events mirrored a proliferation of new words employed to address political and social issues. Revolutionaries transgressed “the normal rules of semantics” causing “‘a complete change’ in meanings,” which in turn altered “the pace of social, political and legislative transformation” (376-377). In the aftermath of the French Revolution and the subsequent uprisings across several parts of the globe (including the often ignored Spanish-speaking contexts), the new “‘imperious celerity of time’” (381) opened up a novel outlook onto the future, so that the making of history became interwoven with the experience of writing history. With regard to the emergence of a new contemporary historical time in the Atlantic world, Fernández Sebastián argues how “secular manifestations” coexisted with theological marks: “Progress” and “Providence” (394) were seen as reconcilable elements. Furthermore, we are told that many thinkers in the mid-nineteenth century deemed the pace of change so rapid and so decisive that an overnight occurrence determined a cataclysmic shift in the chronology of civilization. This consideration enables him to set out a penetrating interpretive grid through which to read our own time shaped by a constellation of events (from September 11 to the Arab Spring) whose essence is precisely to modify people’s existence following the *facts* of one day.

It is a pity that the book lacks an index of names and subjects to help readers navigate through what is virtually an ocean of notions, concepts, and philosophical interpretations. As for its audience, *Political Concepts and Time* will appeal to sundry specialists in multifarious fields of academic activity, but it is hard to envisage a more diffused distribution. Students—not least because of the frequently obscure prose⁵ (there are, however, notable exceptions: the piece by Peter

5. For a telling example, consider the following sentence: “the attempt to analyze the development of [a] concept by accentuating the stages in its modifications, is to surreptitiously perform a mystificatory [sic] operation which is unconscious or which may imply and presuppose the unity of the concept the modifications of which are under analysis, and thereby the continuous existence in the transformations of a unitary nucleus, without which it would be a matter of different concepts and not the transformations of the same concept” (276).

Burke is a rather illuminating instance)—will not be assisted in their approach to the study of the methodology of history. It is almost as if readers were constantly being reminded of the great distance separating the moments when historians *write history* and those when they *write about history*. Unfortunately, clarity often deserts the latter enterprise. In addition, one is puzzled by seeing the works of two of the “founding fathers” of the so-called Cambridge School of the history of political thought (1960s), Quentin Skinner and John Pocock, unflatteringly (and deeply unjustly) referred to as informed by “studied ignorance” and “empty clichés [sic]” (138). At one—rather ungentlemanly—point the former is depicted as misleading in his dialogue with Koselleck with words that reveal more about a grumpy critic than their scholarly target.

Claims of methodological innovation punctuate the volume. And yet one might question whether the assumption that conceptual history offers a novel trajectory whereby it becomes possible to “transcend the limits of [the] nation state” and helps research move on to a more “global” (15-16) scale is not a little too condescending. After all, practitioners whose methods are not those of conceptual history also pursue historical work that breaks the barriers of national boundaries.⁶ In a similar vein, the assertion that conceptual history defies “habitual periodizations” by replacing the temporal structure of the century usually chosen by historians as their “standard unit of research” in favor of “a time span midway between two centuries” (as in the case of Koselleck’s *Sattelzeit*) is again a way of neglecting the fact that other historiographical approaches do exactly the same (16).⁷

Without wanting to sound unduly critical, has it not been common currency of history-writing for at least the past thirty years to historicize “the frameworks of comprehension of the reality that surrounds” (16) historians as well as their interpretations? Is it not trite to maintain that “the greatest assistance and most prudent warning that conceptual history can currently offer historians and social scientists” consists in making them and their work “more reflexive and consequently, more historical” (16)? Isn’t this a *bit* of a snub to those several other schools of historical investigation whose researches are premised on the very same terms, conditions, and principles?⁸

6. One very obvious instance is represented by the specialty field of Atlantic history where the multifaceted intercourse between Europe (Britain and France, above all) and the colonies in the new world throughout the early modern period is the object of studies whose major premise is precisely that the scope of phenomena such as slavery, colonialism, economic exchanges and trade, and cultural contacts between different peoples is fundamentally transnational. In consequence, the traditional historiographical outlook based on national contours is abandoned in favor of multidimensional and multigeographical analyses of a varied range of topics in comparative mode (see, for example, the by-now classic B. Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005] and also *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*, ed. D. Armitage and M. J. Braddick [Basingstoke, UK, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002]).

7. Instances of this tendency are many, but for an example, see I. Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations c. 1650–c. 1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and *English Radicalism, 1550–1850*, ed. G. Burgess and M. Festenstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

8. In fact, to cite one clear example of this antipositivist attitude, Quentin Skinner has pleaded for “a more historically-minded approach to the history of ideas” against all empiricist, objectivity-claiming, and facts-seeking attempts at making historians implausible conveyors of what *exactly* happened in the past, as if they were immune to their own opinions and historical situation” (Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Volume I: *Regarding Method* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002], esp. 1-3, 8-26).

Criticism of the methodology of intellectual history, especially of its alleged lack of engagement in connecting the thoughts of the authors studied with the sociohistorical features of a specific period, is ubiquitous in the volume. Skeptical of all attempts to reconstruct the authorial intentionality of texts, various contributors privilege a path of investigation centered on the polysemic nature of concepts. And yet this view ignores that accurate accounts of ideas in context(s) have become an indisputable trait of works whose methodological perspective belongs in intellectual history. From monographs on political theories to intellectual biographies, from analyses of Western notions of race to explorations of gender in extra-European cultures, intellectual historians are *now* contributing to excitingly new and significantly innovative ways of addressing the perennial problem of connecting theory and practice, high-brow reflection and “popular” mindset.⁹ Moreover, the hackneyed assumption that the history of ideas concentrates primarily on the writings of the great (male and white) thinkers and ignores sources such as pamphlets, parliamentary debates, petitions, and so forth paints a distorting picture of what scholars have actually been doing in the last two decades or more.¹⁰ To testify to the flourishing plurality of research angles pursued in intellectual history stands its engagement not only with verbal texts, but also with nonverbal traces as means to seize how a society mainly expresses itself.¹¹

Intellectual history studies concepts, thoughts, and texts in the specific (linguistic) contexts in which they formed, developed, and were employed in debates, disputes, dialogues between authors, philosophers, and political theorists. Rejecting all readings of past intellectual efforts as timeless and permanently valid as well as dismissing interpretations exclusively conditioned by scholars’ own preoccupations, intellectual historians underline the role of human agency in the formulation of opinions and principles.¹² They also criticize(d) the exponents of the *Begriffsgeschichte* for their tendency to detach concepts from their particular historical settings by dint of referring to terms and families of terms (the English “keywords”). In this respect, the risk implied in the *Begriffsgeschichte* is that of identifying a text as the emblem of a static *mentalité* that, in turn, is the expression of a given social formation.¹³ Instead, intellectual history theories

9. To ascertain this thriving state of the art one can browse the content of journals such as the long-standing *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1940) and the more recent *Modern Intellectual History* (2004) and *Intellectual History Review* (2007).

10. As Donald Kelley already pointed out twenty-five years ago, intellectual history has moved in new directions: “from thought to ‘discourse,’” “from the conscious to the unconscious, from creation to imitation, from intention to meaning, from authorship to readership, from the history of ideas to the ‘social history of ideas,’” “from the sociology of knowledge” to “the ‘anthropology of knowledge’” (see D. R. Kelley, “Horizons of Intellectual History: Retrospect, Circumspect, Prospect,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 1 [1987], 143-169, 160).

11. See, for example, *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, ed. R. Whatmore and B. Young (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2006).

12. See, for example, *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. J. Tully (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), esp. 29-132; Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Volume I: *Regarding Method*, esp. 145-174.

13. On some of these issues see, for example, M. Richter, “Conceptual History (Begriffsgeschichte) and Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 14, no. 4 (1986), 604-637; M. Richter, “Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48, no. 2 (1987), 247-263; M. Richter, “Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner and the Geschichtliche

like contextualism suggest that it is necessary to look at texts as the articulation of stances in a dialogue in which a great role is played both by the exchange of ideas and by the constant invention of arguments and counterarguments in controversies. Endorsing this view enables us to ask which works and which theorists historical texts responded to and why specific languages were chosen to defend specific opinions. Besides, this explains that one chief difference between these two methodological perspectives regards what Pocock defined as the problem of the separation/unity of social structure (manifested, for instance, in official languages) and discourse (intended as speech and intertwined with debate).¹⁴

Yet this is not to deny that *Begriffsgeschichte* and intellectual history hold similar stances on some important points. In fact, they both reject historiographical currents that see ideas as mere “passive reflections of a social reality” or as eternal essences. Likewise, both Koselleck and Skinner warned historians of the danger of interpreting writings in ways that are conditioned by their contemporary concepts and/or concerns.¹⁵

Perhaps one way of bringing the two approaches closer¹⁶ is to ask whether the historian is an antiquarian or a rescuer of the past or, rather, a shaper of its cultural codes. Is studying history in its multifarious manifestations a reproductive enterprise or does it imply a creative endeavor to reconstruct fragments far away from us in time and space? Should historical research be guided by the unachievable goal of telling what *really* happened? Or—more humbly—should it consist in a search for understanding, through the fallible instruments at our disposal, the meanings of signs left behind on that distant horizon?

A possible answer to these important questions might depend on how we look at our practice. More specifically, it might have to do with what we think of the conventional tools that we deploy in our effort to provide new readings of history. From the use of categories such as “early modern,” “modern,” and “postmodern,” which divide into smaller units of time the chronological vastness opened in front of us, to the employment of the much-debated *-isms* and *-ologies*, which should help us grasp portions of the theoretical panorama of the past, we proceed tentatively en route to explain a variegated multiplicity of language patterns to be found on the canvas of history where they have been woven in different ways by men and women. Equally, classifications of past traces according to whether they are written or oral, documents or texts, public/official or private, intellectual or popular, and so forth constitute indispensable lenses through which to bring into focus historical experience(s). All of these instruments are the fruit of conventions that facilitate the study of history, that sustain our inevitably limited approach to it. They entail a process of simplification, but also of clarification and

Grundbegriffe,” *History and Theory* 29, no. 1 (1990), 38-70; M. Bevir, “Begriffsgeschichte,” *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (2000), 273-284.

14. J. G. A. Pocock, “The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d’Historien*: Some Considerations on Practice,” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. A. Pagden (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19-38.

15. Bevir, “Begriffsgeschichte,” 277.

16. This is an effort that has been pursued by scholars such as “Melvin Richter, Kari Palonen or Elías Palti” (5).

of comprehension: they act as a sort of family album where, instead of our own personal past, it is the wider manifestations of humankind to be detailed, provisionally immortalized, temporarily fixed on a sheet on which different phases of its collective life are described.

If, following Skinner's perspective, the task of the intellectual historian is to become aware of concepts and ideas used nowadays in an unconscious and even uncomprehending manner, then to closely examine our modes of employing terms like "modernity" or "radicalism" is not only justified but necessary.¹⁷ As an archaeologist brings to life through new techniques artifacts of the past for us to observe and gauge, so the type of historian whose work we admire should then not refrain from adopting language, categories, and models that are both respectful of the rhetoric of the authors studied and capable of conveying to modern readers a sense of what it might *have been like*.¹⁸ This way of proceeding is also inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of discourse as social practice and language in action. It applies to the key issue of history-writing and the role of the historian in it: a quasi-Wittgensteinian linguistic cartography; an anthropology of language-usage.¹⁹ This is not some kind of Borgesian utopia whose ambition is to catalog every application of the scholarly vocabulary. Rather, it is an attempt to provide a picture of how a number of our implements—at least, those most frequently resorted to—are used, to what purposes, with what consequences, and at what risks. Despite being a work *ad infinitum*, this strategy enables us to recognize some cardinal points in our intellectual horizon and in that of the characters considered. As a geographical map does not exactly correspond to the surface of the earth, so a schematic grid of tools/applications does not exhaust the entirety of all possible uses, but makes us more aware of the territory on which we move as investigators of the past. Exploring the ways in which *isms* or categories like "modern" might be adopted as well as how they fit with past terminology can be illuminating for the historian at pains to understand different theories, convictions, and prejudices.

Thus, this means fostering a more fragmented reading of ideas in a given historical context with the platitudinous but fundamental goal of communicating knowledge to twenty-first-century readers. Although all taxonomic attempts to seize the past are exposed to anachronisms superimposed on historical sources and presentism-guided interpretations of them, to condemn practitioners' imaginative efforts as altogether reductionist and constraining is to forget, and refuse to accept, that (intellectual) historians are more *similar* to artists than to scientists. As Brian Young—following Duncan Forbes—put it, they are active and persistent "in cultivating the artist's penetrating eye."²⁰ Shaped by "the idea of

17. See Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Volume I: *Regarding Method*, for example, 6.

18. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110-112. See also R. Lamb, "Quentin Skinner's Revised Historical Contextualism: A Critique," *History of the Human Sciences* 22, no. 3 (2009), 51-73.

19. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. E. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). For Wittgenstein's anti-essentialism, see also *idem*, *Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations," Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960) and *idem*, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, transl. C. J. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), vol. 2.

20. B. Young, "The Tyranny of the Definite Article: Some Thoughts on the Art of Intellectual History," *History of European Ideas* 28, no. 1 (2002), 105. As for Forbes, see D. Forbes, "Aesthetic

history as literature, and literature as history,” historians are “uniquely sensitive masters of rhetoric (and entrepreneurs of the rhetorical repertoire rather than philosophers).”²¹ This profile strongly reminds us that “historians, like novelists, are makers of order.”²² Asked (pressed?) from many quarters to justify their work by way of comparing it with that produced by others,²³ “our” historian does not proceed to a profession of faith. Rather, he or she acts knowing that his or her task is to stage the aesthetically rich and intellectually insightful encounter between texts (a plural variety of them) and contexts (as distant as they might be). Instead of cutting a presumptuously—when not tyrannically—oracular figure, *this* historian becomes more of a stylist whose trained imagination²⁴ has the liberating power of bringing together the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown.²⁵

The characterization of the historian hitherto set forth also recalls Dominick LaCapra’s claim that in order to produce good and innovative history there has to be a combination of what he labeled the “symptomatic” (of larger forces in society and politics) and the “critical” (history’s creative force of changing debates, shifting paradigms).²⁶ A purely documentary historiography is a dangerous illusion (based on unchanging representations of changing particulars) where the extremes of “the narrowly historicist and the ahistorical” meet. By contrast, the type of history-writing as narrative art here supported has to do with a “process of inquiry” in which the historian formulates multiple re-interpretations of the products of cultures, being aware of his or her own historicity.²⁷ The point is that doing history is a way of rethinking the relation between self (and not a fixed one

Thoughts on Doing the History of Ideas,” *History of European Ideas* 27, no. 2 (2001), 101-113. The opposite opinion, that is, that historians have become more like scientists and less like literary men, can be found in R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997). Perhaps, one could say—sadly—that nowadays historians resemble neither of these two figures, but they are rather like hurrying and bustling civil servants or business executives (Forbes, “Aesthetic Thoughts,” 107, 113)!

21. Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article,” 105, 107.

22. B. Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2001), 19.

23. See, for example, Bevir’s claim in Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article,” 104, fn. 14.

24. Partly drawing on the ideas of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, imagination is here taken as a creative force leading to the elaboration of new images of reality. Thus, the “function” of the historian becomes that of providing new and novel images of the past. Informed by the imaginative power of the practitioner, history-writing is, therefore, the self-critical enterprise of unfolding different portions of the past through the inevitably relative and fallible scholarly use of image-construction. As for Bachelard, see his *The Psycho-analysis of Fire* (1938) and *The Poetics of Reverie* (1960).

25. Brian Young referred to Hugh Trevor-Roper as an eminent instance of this kind of history-practitioner (see Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article,” 108). See also *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper*, ed. H. Lloyd-Jones, V. Pearl, and B. Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981).

26. See D. LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

27. Such an awareness is akin to artists’ full immersion in their landscape. It follows that the intellectual historian is more a painter of the sublime than of the beautiful. In other terms, artists paint in the midst of a storm and not from the *snug* of their studio (Forbes, “Aesthetic Thoughts,” 106, 113), that is, from a safe (historically neutral and objective) distance. Equally, historians are caught in the whirlwind of their time’s contemporary intellectual activity, scholarly fashions, and cultural interests that tune their research radar. This configuration of the historical profession should also remind us that interpretive *sensibility* is an indispensable feature of the practitioner’s toolbox (see B. Young, “J. W. Burrow: A Personal History,” *History of European Ideas* 37, no. 1 [2011], 7-15, esp. 7-8).

at that) and the “other,” language and the world. Rejecting aspirations to either total unity (purity, order) or total disunity (chaos, uncontrolled dissemination), “our” historian is he or she who has an internalized conversation between the critical intellectual and the scholarly scholar (traditional erudite) going on in a productive and creative, responsible and engaging manner. The task of *this character* is to set out an “informed dialogue with the past” investigating “significant texts and their relations to pertinent contexts.”²⁸

These historians’ work becomes in some ways that of translators who convey meaning(s) from the past to us through their modern interpretive frameworks. Accordingly, they account for the important variations that informed the meanings of concepts such as “absolute,” “homeland,” “radical,” and “liberty” and clarify how these affect scholarly definitions of “absolutism,” “patriotism,” “radicalism,” and “liberalism.” As intellectual categories of the former genus helped societies to reflect on their organization and life, so scholarly conventions belonging to the latter group invite scholars to rigorously examine their own professional apparatus. In this regard, we can say with John Burrow that “[i]ntellectual history is not parody”: rather, it is a negotiation between us and the past in the form of “eavesdropping” and indeed “translation.”²⁹ It is necessary to employ concepts from elsewhere for interpreting historical discourse and make connections that might well have escaped us so as to better comprehend the implicit rules of past periods of which the authors we are attending to were themselves unaware. To see the apparently familiar as alien is constructive and is conducive to a richer understanding of historical meanings. All *reconstruction* of the past has thus to be informed by a certain amount of creativity. This corresponds to addressing “the reflective communal life of human beings in the past,” namely their arguments, principles, and opinions about the world and themselves, their interaction with others, their views of the future, and all of this in relation to the linguistic and rhetorical means in which they articulated all of the above.³⁰

Intellectual historians as eavesdroppers are a mixture of opacity and clarity. Accordingly, they engage in a process similar to that of learning a foreign language, which entails the study of both its linguistic components and its contextual background. As translators, they play the role not of sympathetic actors re-experiencing events, but focus on transmission. They are a sort of go-between, bringing to life “the conversations of the past,” so that the two extremes of anachronism and of the irreducible difference of the past might be averted. These two kinds of “impoverishment” deny our “genuine negotiation” with past utterances.³¹ In

28. LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*, 60-61, 16.

29. J. W. Burrow, “Intellectual History in English Academic Life: Reflections on a Revolution,” in Whatmore and Young, eds., *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History*, 8-24, 22-23.

30. *Ibid.*, 11.

31. *Ibid.*, 22-24. To these two dangers, Skinner added that of “prolepsis,” that is to say the treating of an author as the anticipator of arguments which were to be elaborated later on but to which their text is not yet been proved to have contributed. Instead, Skinner analyzed what an author had intended to do (had meant) and what they had succeeded in doing (had meant to others). In this sense, he linked the study of textual utterances, their context, and their reception. The language available to the author would establish the boundaries of the *sayable* (of what they could say), of the intention (of what they might intend to say), and of the reception (of what they were understood to say). On these ideas, see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Volume I: *Regarding Method*, esp. 73-74, and also J. G. A.

contemporary society the former corresponds to a rejection of difference and a constant attempt to assimilate, whereas the latter is an exaggeration of alienness, treating identity as a static and reductive category with which to pigeonhole men and women. Individuals, peoples, and cultures are more elusive and mobile. Hence we need to balance our intellectual, scholarly, and interpretive efforts between distance and familiarity, complexity and coherence, unrecognizability and recognizability. There is no vantage point from which to look at history.³² After all, this is so because—as Donald Kelley once brilliantly put it—language is an “ocean in which we all swim” and where “we are fishes” rather than “oceanographers.”³³

To address the foregoing questions implies advancing divergent viewpoints on the *métier d'historien*.³⁴ Students of different disciplines within the larger framework of history-writing vehemently disagree about “the right thing to do” with regard to method and often dismiss as unfounded and sloppy ways of proceeding that are not in tune with theirs. Instead of perpetuating this less than sympathetic trend and prescribe recipes for the “good scholar,” it is more valuable to interrogate the field of research in which we pursue our activity. In so doing, we might come to the nondogmatic and flexible conclusion that our work—as, for instance, conceptual, intellectual, or social historians—might well benefit from the (re)discovery of *imagination* as a pertinent device with which to perform historical research and enhance reflection on the art of history-writing.

Abandoning all reassuring notions of philosophical history and/or of philosophy of history,³⁵ “our” practitioner must—less reassuringly but more interestingly—face the challenge of being constantly on “the edge of a cliff” opened onto a sea of uncertainty and fallibility when writing history.³⁶ Whether we like it or not, history is “a living process”³⁷ in which both historians *and* their objects are/were living. Consequently, the former need “to listen, and to listen with contemporary ears sharp enough, through training, to catch the nuances of apparently dead tones and registers.”³⁸ Eavesdropper, translator, listener, the historian is no less a shaper/crafter of the cauldron of the past.

Being animated by the spirit of critical enquiry, conceptual history *and* intellectual history (should) keep alive a manifold sense of possibility to shed some always changing light into the night of ideas and their origins. This helps to rethink many of the values informing our present manners of life and the ways

Pocock, “Quentin Skinner. The History of Politics and the Politics of History,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004), 532-550.

32. Burrow, “Intellectual History in English Academic Life,” 24.

33. D. R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 300.

34. See Pocock, “The Concept of a Language and the *Métier d'Historien*,” *passim*.

35. This might lead historians to embrace *irony* as another vital key with which to unlock new reserves of historical knowledge.

36. This phrase is borrowed from R. Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, transl. L. G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

37. Young, “The Tyranny of the Definite Article,” 110.

38. *Ibid.*, 113.

in which we comprehend them.³⁹ It might also remind all types of historians that their toolkits are put together on the basis of choices (to the exclusion of other legitimate ones) made at different times in that endlessly finite stream of events that we call history (*our own* history too).

Within the thematic plurality and theoretical richness of Koselleck's teachings unveiled by Fernández Sebastián's volume, the most important and somehow comforting is that whereby "[t]here always occurs in history more or less than is contained in the given conditions. Behind this 'more or less' are to be found men, whether they wish it or not" (186).⁴⁰ To bear this in mind is what the self-defined "professional layman" (417) Reinhart Koselleck did so thoroughly throughout his oeuvre. Under the equally eloquent pens of conceptual and intellectual historians, ideas are thus deprived of their spiritualist, divine, and metaphysical aura: instead, they are plunged into the more earthly ground of human criticism, dialogue, creative interpretation, and skepticism on which history-writing might stand more firmly and more fruitfully.

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39. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*. Volume I: *Regarding Method*, 6.

40. See R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. and with an introduction by K. Tribe (New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 2004), 204.