

European Intellectual History as Contemporary History

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Abstract

The first part of this essay examines the peculiar role European intellectual history played in coming to terms with the twentieth century as an ‘Age of Extremes’ and the different weight it was given for that task at different times and in different national contexts up to the 1970s. The second part looks at the contemporary history of politically focused intellectual history – and the possible impact of the latter on the writing of contemporary history in general: it will be asked how the three great innovative movements in the history of political thought which emerged in the last fifty years have related to the practice of contemporary history: the German school of conceptual history, the ‘Cambridge School’, and the ‘linguistic turn’. The third part focuses on recent trends to understand processes of liberalization – as opposed to the older search for causes of political extremism. It is also in the third part that the so far rather Euro-centric perspective is left behind, as attempts to create an intellectual history of the more or less new enemies of the West are examined. Finally, the author pleads for a contemporary intellectual history that seeks novel ways of understanding the twentieth century and the ‘newest history’ since 1989 by combining tools from conceptual history and the Cambridge School.

Keywords

Bielefeld School, Cambridge School, communism, nazism, socialism

Writing ‘contemporary intellectual history’ – at first sight, such an activity seems to pose no particular challenges: it would appear to be about analyzing the broad

For Peter Pulzer, on his eightieth birthday

Some parts of this essay draw on my ‘The triumph of what (if anything)? Rethinking political ideologies and political institutions in twentieth-century Europe’, in: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 14 (2009) as well as my forthcoming book on political thought in twentieth century Europe (Yale UP, 2011). Thanks to Peter Pulzer, Samuel Moyn and Martin Rühl for comments and suggestions.

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philosophical debates which animate one's times. To be sure, the status and precise character of intellectual history has been intensely contested in the last half-century or so: the autonomy of the 'field' has repeatedly been questioned; first social and then cultural history threatened to marginalize it. Then, with the 'linguistic turn', intellectual history as the study of 'texts' seemed to be everything (since, in the eyes of proponents of the 'linguistic turn', anything could be read as a 'text') or nothing (since, according to traditionalists, nothing seemed to remain of the examination of classical philosophical and literary texts which had constituted the core of older conceptions of intellectual history).¹ But, be that as it may, *prima facie*, combining the broad categories of 'contemporary history' and 'intellectual history' seems to create no particular problems.

Or does it? Let me try another approach, by putting together three seemingly uncontroversial statements – maybe even clichés – about the practice of writing history. First, the widely held notion that much – perhaps all – history-writing is shot through with normative purposes. Second, the fact that much – but not necessarily all – history-writing remains deeply embedded in national contexts. And third, the notion that *our* contemporary history – the twentieth century, for the most part – is one of unprecedented cruelty and violence, which, to be sure, has involved some countries more than others (so that perpetrator-nations and victim-nations remain, by and large, distinct). The point is that, historically, contemporary history was created to comprehend an age of extraordinary political and social upheaval and political crimes. From the beginning, as Hans Rothfels put it, contemporary history was conceived as a form of 'crisis history'; it was, so the doyen of post-1945 West German *Zeitgeschichte* claimed, a form of historical inquiry which was not to be about 'neutrality in questions which essentially concern us' (while, Rothfels added, of course also necessitating the 'disciplined search for truth' and the 'elimination of prejudices as far as possible').² In different national contexts this effort has taken different shapes; and only in a few has *intellectual* history been seen as central to such attempts at understanding.

The first part of this essay examines the peculiar role of intellectual history in coming to terms with the twentieth century as an 'Age of Extremes' (Eric Hobsbawm), and the different weight it was given for that task at different times and in different national contexts until the 1970s. In short, it is about the intellectual history of contemporary history. The second part, on the other hand, will be about the contemporary history of politically focused intellectual history – and the possible impact of the latter on the writing of contemporary history in general. I will ask how, if at all, the three great innovative movements in the history of political thought which have emerged in the last 50 years or so have related to the practice of contemporary history (whether as a form of coming-to-terms-with-the-past or not): the German school of conceptual history; secondly, the 'Cambridge School', widely

1 For an overview, see A. Grafton, 'The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950–2000 and Beyond', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67 (2006), 1–32.

2 H. Rothfels, 'Zeitgeschichte als Aufgabe', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 1, 1 (1953), 1–8, at 5: 'nicht Neutralität in Fragen, die uns wesentlich betreffen'. For *Zeitgeschichte* intellectual history remained secondary, as I argue below; it is telling that the topics suggested for the IfZ, founded in 1949, contained only one that broadly had to do with intellectual history: Moeller van den Bruck and the *Tat*-circle.

credited with the 'contextualist revolution' in the history of political thought; and, thirdly, the various perspectives summarized under the label 'linguistic turn' (which, to be sure, was not exclusively about the history of political thought). Finally, in a third part, I will focus on recent trends to investigate and understand processes of liberalization and moderation – as opposed to the older search for causes of political extremism. It is also in the third part that the so far rather Eurocentric perspective will be left behind, as alongside the study of 'liberalization', I will take a glance at the recent attempts to create an intellectual history of the more or less new enemies of the West. I will end what can only be a rather rapid and partial survey with my own plea for a contemporary intellectual history that seeks novel ways of understanding the twentieth century *and* the 'newest history' since 1989 by combining tools from the workshops in Cambridge and Bielefeld (that is, the home of German *Begriffsgeschichte*).

It is a commonplace that the twentieth century was an age of ideological extremes. It is also a perception that was very much shared by contemporaries (alongside the impression that the twentieth century was one of new 'political religions' and new quasi-religious wars). Less obviously, this belief in the vast and direct influence of ideas was also widely held *across* political and philosophical divides: one might think of Khrushchev supposedly remarking about the Hungarian uprising of 1956, 'none of this would have happened if a couple of writers had been shot in time', or Czesław Miłosz's observation that in mid-twentieth-century Europe 'the inhabitants of many European countries came, in general unpleasantly, to the realization that their fate could be influenced directly by intricate and abstruse books of philosophy'.

Almost inevitably it seemed, then, contemporary history would have to concern itself with intellectual antecedents of extremist political movements and governments. The 1950s and early 1960s, in particular, were a golden age for identifying the origins of the two contending totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, and tracing the trajectories of anti-liberal thought in the present. Two kinds of history could be distinguished here: properly contemporary history that dealt with the first half of the twentieth century, and attempts to trace the sources of twentieth-century extremist movements back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in other words, not strictly speaking contemporary history, but history with such a strong (and always explicit) emphasis on connections with the present that no one could have thought of it as antiquarian or politically neutral.

Often enough – but by no means always – retrospective attempts to understand National Socialism also served to criticize the Soviet Union and advance the cause of Western liberal democracy during the Cold War: what appeared as a quite novel mixture of political history, political science and intellectual history was intimately bound up with what came to be known as 'Cold War liberalism'; its patron saints were Tocqueville, Lord Acton and Jacob Burckhardt.³ Cold War liberal historiography tended to explain the political catastrophes of the twentieth century through

3 See, for instance, L. Gossman, 'Jacob Burckhardt: Cold War Liberal?', *Journal of Modern History*, 74 (2002), 538–72. To be sure, there were also such attempts at understanding the intellectual antecedents of twentieth-century atrocities from within Marxist perspectives – the outstanding example being Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Berlin 1954).

the rise of ‘mass politics’ or ‘totalitarian democracy’ which had made their first appearance with the French Revolution (and which found their ideologues in Rousseau and the Jacobins). In 1946 the German historian Friedrich Meinecke, the leading light – in fact, in many ways the founder – of the history of political ideas in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century (and, alongside Dilthey and Troeltsch, a creator of German *Geistesgeschichte* as such),⁴ wrote about the causes of the ‘German catastrophe’; he traced it back to the French Revolution and insisted that ‘the masses’ were still ‘advancing’ in the present.⁵ The point here was partly to ‘de-Germanize’ National Socialism: to make it appear as a transnational, if not universal, phenomenon which could be explained with abstractions like ‘modernity’ or the ‘demonic’ qualities of power as such – as opposed to any specifically German ideas, or aspects of German political history.⁶

Not everyone engaged in such rather obvious exculpatory strategies – which for a long time were to give the history of ideas in Germany a bad name as such. There were a whole range of works which sought to trace the origins of totalitarianism at the level of ‘high intellectual history’, without blaming ‘modernity’ or the ‘masses’. Outstanding examples were Kurt Sontheimer’s book on antidemocratic thought in Weimar⁷ and Christian Krockow’s volume on decisionism,⁸ both of which constituted works of genuinely contemporary intellectual history. But there were also Martin Malia’s writing on nineteenth-century Russian thought,⁹ Peter Viereck’s *Metapolitics: The Roots of the Nazi Mind* (first published in 1941, reissued in 1961),¹⁰ Fritz Stern’s *The Politics of Cultural Despair* about nineteenth-century German anti-liberal ideology,¹¹ and, internationally probably best-known for a while, Jacob Talmon’s *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (which put the blame squarely on Rousseau) and his subsequent *Political*

4 E. Schulin, ‘Die Stellung Friedrich Meineckes in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft’, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 230 (1980), 3–29.

5 F. Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe: Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden 1946), 21.

6 G. Ritter, *Die Dämonie der Macht: Betrachtungen über Geschichte und Wesen des Machtproblems im politischen Denken der Neuzeit* (Munich 1948).

7 K. Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik: Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933* (Munich 1962). Because Sontheimer so clearly exposed the role of representatives of the Conservative Revolution in paving Hitler’s path to power, the book proved controversial and drew much criticism from the nationalist Right in West Germany (it also had been rejected for the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*’s publication series). See N. Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen 2004), 287–9.

8 C. von Krockow, *Die Entscheidung* (Stuttgart 1957).

9 In particular his ‘study of ideologies’: Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812–1855* (Cambridge, MA 1961) – a book focused on intellectual currents during the first half of the nineteenth century, but with obvious relevance for 1917 and after; Malia explicitly rejected teleological accounts, but still wrote on the first page: ‘No nation in history ever prepared its revolution longer or more self-consciously than Russia’.

10 P. Viereck, *Metapolitics* (New York 1961[1941]). In the new preface Viereck clarified his understanding of intellectual history as follows: ‘Overestimated by ivory-tower subjective idealists and underestimated by capitalist and socialist materialists, ideas do not “cause” history; but they do shape the particular form which history, however caused, will take; this form, this “mere idea”, may then become a matter of life or death for millions, especially for those who don’t think ideas are a matter of life and death’ (xxvi).

11 F. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, CA 1961).

Messianism, which once more insisted that ‘the totalitarian-democratic nature, or at least potentialities, of the Rousseauist-Jacobin canon stare into one’s face’.¹²

The fact that the National Socialists had explicitly presented themselves as *opponents* of the French Revolution was an inconvenient detail for advocates of the notion that all totalitarianisms had originated with the entry of the (French) masses into politics.¹³ But at least the Bolsheviks had openly and repeatedly invoked the Jacobin template in executing and then justifying the Russian Revolution. The supposed key factor here was ‘the totalitarian-democratic expectation of some pre-ordained, all-embracing and exclusive scheme of things, which was presumed to represent the better selves, the true interests, the genuine will and the real freedom of men’.¹⁴

While historians like Talmon and Malia attributed supreme importance to intellectual history in the war of ideas against the Soviet ‘ideocracy’, they were not so much interested in political theories – understood as conceptual structures to justify the rule of some over others – in and of themselves, but rather in what Malia called the “‘social psychology” of ideas’, and what Talmon described as his primary focus on ‘awareness and beliefs’; Talmon insisted that his first major study on totalitarianism was above all concerned with ‘a state of mind, a way of feeling, a disposition, a pattern of mental, emotional and behaviouristic elements, best compared to the set of attitudes engendered by a religion’.

Much more so than the historians of socialism and communism, students of National Socialism tended not to take nazism (and those intellectuals who had paved the nazis’ way to power) seriously as offering any kind of intellectual content (when in fact during the 1930s liberal observers had still been willing to see it as ‘a deliberate and self-conscious political philosophy’).¹⁵ A political scientist like Krockow, writing on Carl Schmitt and Heidegger in the mid-1950s, was the exception, rather than the rule.¹⁶ To be sure, the causes of twentieth-century cataclysms were seen as at least partly intellectual (and emotional – after all, the masses are never anything but emotional); but nazi thought itself was habitually dismissed as holding no interest in and of itself in explaining the German, European and, ultimately, global ‘catastrophes’ which nazism had brought about. National Socialism and Italian fascism were long treated as obviously forms of ‘gutter ideology’. And while Marxism could hardly be written off in the same way as merely a façade for the reign of the most basic instincts, the roots of the Soviet experience were often found in the supposed pathologies of Russian history (including all sorts of

12 Ibid. See also M. H. Hacohen, ‘Jacob Talmon between Zionism and Cold War Liberalism’, *History of European Ideas*, 34 (2007), 146–57. Talmon’s thought was at least partially influenced by two British mentors – Harold Laski and R.H. Tawney – who probably encouraged him in drawing a line between liberalized Social Democracy (fully compatible with Cold War liberalism) and communism as necessarily leading to a form of totalitarianism.

13 An exception was Isaiah Berlin, who in the early 1960s traced the origins of fascism to the counter-revolutionary thinker Joseph de Maistre.

14 J.L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (London 1960), xiii.

15 K. Loewenstein, ‘Law in the Third Reich’, *Yale Law Journal*, 45 (1936), 779–815, at 779–80.

16 Another was J. Neurohr, *Der Mythos vom Dritten Reich: Zur Geistesgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart 1957).

intellectual and civilizational *Sonderwege* which as such had little to do with, broadly speaking, Marxist thought).

This basic tendency of not taking a range of extremist ideas seriously *as ideas* prevailed for a surprisingly long time. Ernst Nolte was one of the first to look more closely at the origins of fascism in a number of European movements and parties; but even though he was writing as much from the vantage point of a philosopher (and Heidegger pupil) as from that of an intellectual historian, the core assumption of his 'historical-genetic' approach was that ideologies ultimately rested each on a 'basic emotion', or *Grundemotion* (such as *Angst*).¹⁷ And clearly, it was more important to understand or get at the basic emotion (than at the basic idea).

Karl Dietrich Bracher, whose *Dissolution of the Weimar Republic* had been a milestone in the establishment of the discipline of contemporary history in postwar West Germany, eventually turned from political to intellectual history and wrote about the twentieth century as an 'age of ideologies'. Conceived from an explicitly liberal anti-totalitarian perspective, Bracher's account posited that 'ideologies' were a result of the loss of a belief in progress towards the end of the nineteenth century; they were expressions of 'crisis thinking', made up of dispersed and often incoherent fragments from 'decayed thought systems'.¹⁸ In a somewhat similar vein, François Furet, in his intellectual-cum-political history of communism and its fellow travelers, *The Passing of an Illusion*, ultimately identified 'bourgeois self-hatred' as a major factor in explaining the ideological enthusiasms of twentieth-century intellectuals.¹⁹ Here intellectual history tended to be the political and moral (and, some would charge, moralizing) history of psychologically troubled intellectuals.²⁰

In many ways, then, during the Cold War contemporary intellectual history understood itself as a pedagogical or even combative enterprise, devoted, among other things, to a kind of intellectual cleansing. It was as much cathartic as it was prophylactic. But overall, it constituted a relatively marginal enterprise – compared with contemporary political and, in particular, social history. Especially the latter was heavily influenced by Marxism, which tended to downgrade the importance of ideas, or focused primarily on the critique of ideology. Particularly in Germany, left-liberal historians were prone to dismiss the discipline of intellectual history as carrying the whiff of old-fashioned – and, so it was widely assumed, inherently conservative – *Geistesgeschichte*. The latter's hermeneutic approach, it was often

17 E. Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche: die Action française der italienische Faschismus, der Nationalsozialismus* (Munich 1963). On Nolte's general conception of ideologies, see also his *Historische Existenz* (Munich 1998).

18 K.D. Bracher, *Zeit der Ideologien: Eine Geschichte politischen Denkens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart 1982).

19 Furet's *Le Passé d'une Illusion* actually endorsed Bracher's book as 'la meilleure introduction générale au sujet', in a footnote. See *Le Passé d'une Illusion: Essai sur l'idée communiste au XXe siècle* (Paris 1995), 223.

20 To be sure, there were exceptions. But those who attributed coherence to fascist thought or credited it with intellectual innovations were often perceived as marginal or even scandalous. See for instance Z. Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris 1983); and Idem, *La Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Paris 1989).

argued, did not allow for the rational transparency (and social-scientific exactness) for which social history in particular should be striving – not to speak of the tracing and furthering of what Hans-Ulrich Wehler called ‘emancipatory development processes’.²¹ The residual historicism of *Geistesgeschichte* also made it particularly suspect, as having been complicit in some of the authoritarian traditions with which the *normative* enterprise of contemporary history was trying to break – although on closer examination it would be hard to sustain that historicism, understood as a form of relativism, had been central to any kind of authoritarian, let alone totalitarian thought.

In its vehemence this dismissal of intellectual history as such was arguably a German peculiarity.²² But the general trend was the same almost across the West, even if not always for directly political reasons: in France, the *Annales* School left relatively little room for intellectual history as an autonomous activity dealing with, broadly speaking, literary and philosophical texts. At the same time, an intellectual history of Vichy comparable to the German accounts of nazism’s *Geistesgeschichte*, however flawed, remained a taboo.²³ The English, on the other hand, had somehow been persuaded ‘that the history of ideas was an un-British activity’ (with Lewis Namier as the most powerful persuader).²⁴

By contrast, in the United States intellectual history had seen an unprecedented flowering in the 1940s and 1950s (though with little attention paid to contemporary history) – some even declared it the ‘queen of the historical sciences’.²⁵ At mid-century intellectual history had long ceased to be part of a progressive crusade, whose proponents had affirmed at the beginning of the twentieth century that the ‘history of ideas could help reform the contemporary world’;²⁶ rather, it now was meant to celebrate Western culture in the face of the nazi and, in particular, the Soviet threats. Hence the 1940s and 1950s were also the heyday of compulsory

21 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Geschichte als Historische Sozialwissenschaft* (Frankfurt am Main 1973), 15.

22 The distinction between *Geistesgeschichte* and *Ideengeschichte* is not always easy to establish, although most would agree that the latter is a subcategory of the former. In general, the former, mostly because of its historicist or even Hegelian associations, carries overtones of organic wholeness (identified with a *Zeitgeist*) which the latter lacks (and which can therefore take a much more analytical form, less dependent on the notion of feeling one’s way into the spirit of an age). But not even the ‘founders’ necessarily used these words, let alone distinguished between them; Dilthey, for instance, spoke of a *Geschichte der Weltanschauungen*. An interesting argument that very much went against the grain of what was believed in the English-speaking world and in West Germany was Leo Spitzer’s claim that *Geistesgeschichte* was infinitely better suited to understanding the phenomenon of ‘Hitlerism’ as a whole, compared to the analytically oriented history of ideas practiced by Spitzer’s Johns Hopkins colleague Arthur Lovejoy. See his ‘Geistesgeschichte vs. History of Ideas as Applied to Hitlerism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 5 (1944), 191–203.

23 When the taboo was eventually broken in the 1970s, it was often a matter of going from one extreme to the other: see, for instance, Bernard-Henri Lévy, *L’idéologie française* (Paris 1981).

24 A. Momigliano, ‘A Piedmontese View of the History of Ideas’, in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford 1977), 1–7, at 1. Momigliano further explained that ‘it seems to me that the price English historians paid in the 1930s for remaining independent of German *Ideengeschichte* was to jettison their own tradition of the history of ideas’: *ibid.*, 4.

25 R. Darnton, ‘Intellectual and Cultural History’, in M. Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, NY 1980), 327–54.

26 J.H. Robinson, quoted by Schulin, ‘Die Stellung Friedrich Meineckes’, *op. cit.*, 20.

courses in 'Western Civilization'; here intellectual history served as a form of civic education, moral edification and, not least, political confidence-building during the Cold War. Beginning in the 1960s, however, social history seemed to be displacing intellectual history, leaving at most a small space for what Robert Darnton, alongside Peter Gay, was to call a 'social history of ideas'. The fact that Cold War liberalism was also coming under major attack in the 1960s and 1970s hardly helped the varieties of contemporary intellectual history which had been so deeply informed by it.

But it helped another kind of intellectual history – one that arguably was an exception in the Western world as a whole, but that kept flying the flag for intellectual history in the USA, even when cultural history and the linguistic turn threatened to take its last bastions in the 1970s and 1980s: I am speaking of the European intellectual history practiced by scholars who emerged, broadly speaking, from the New Left and who made it their task to introduce American readers to twentieth-century Central European thought, that of the Frankfurt School and Georg Lukács in particular. Historians such as Martin Jay and Anson Rabinbach focused on the roots (and the possible remains in the present) of National Socialism. But their political default option was not Cold War liberalism at all – it was Western Marxism. Within the American academy, this approach to contemporary intellectual history was to remain enormously influential for Europeanists – but unlike with the Cold War liberals and the German anti-totalitarians, it had little resonance beyond the universities. It was also not particularly innovative in method.

What are usually construed as the main methodological innovations in intellectual history after the 1950s had relatively little impact on the writing of contemporary intellectual history. This, I would argue, had more to do with the intrinsic limits of these new methods than any politically motivated resistance by intellectual historians dealing with the very recent past.

German conceptual history – or *Begriffsgeschichte* – never presented itself as a kind of neutral toolkit for the historian. Rather, its approach was itself deeply informed by the somewhat skeptical perspective on modernity as an age of 'ideologization' which we already encountered with Cold War liberalism. What the conceptual historians called the modern *Sattelzeit* – the period when the modern meanings of a number of key concepts tended to be fixed, or at least when the range in which their meaning could be contested became limited – was also one of enormous social upheaval, democratization and thus a new kind of mass politics; not least, the era witnessed the rise of dangerous philosophies of history – which, in their impact, were similar to the political messianism which Talmon had so forcefully criticized.²⁷

27 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Einleitung', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart 1992 [1972]), xiii–xxviii. Koselleck stressed that keywords – especially 'collective singular' concepts such as 'history' – were becoming more and more abstract and therefore easier to 'ideologize'; processes of 'pluralization' and ever-increasing demands for participation also led to the politicization of language and its impregnation with philosophies of history.

The normative implications of some of the underlying assumptions of *Begriffsgeschichte* are highly debatable (one could see them as far more conservative than any kind of Cold War liberalism) – what is not debatable is that the heroic efforts of the conceptual historians in working out their method and assembling their famous eight-volume lexicon had little impact on contemporary history. One reason was obvious: the periods (and underlying structural changes) that conceptual historians were interested in were much longer than anything under consideration by contemporary historians; concepts would take considerable time to settle on meanings or have them shifted again. After all, the German conceptual historians sought to understand nothing less than the ‘dissolution of the old and the emergence of the modern world’; the *Sattelzeit* on which they focused as the period when distinctively modern concepts had been formed lasted at least a hundred years (1750–1850). While conceptual history could serve as a form of ‘semantological control’ of language use in the present and even lead to ‘political clarification’, Reinhart Koselleck and his colleagues insisted that in the present concepts in one sense needed no historical account, as their meaning could be grasped by anyone.²⁸

Another reason for the limited impact of conceptual history on contemporary history was less obvious – and sheds light on some of the limits of *Begriffsgeschichte* itself. Rather than actually debating changing understandings of concepts, at least some of the contributors to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* simply traced the changing semi-official definitions (and semantic environments) of words, especially from one lexicon entry to another over time. Such an approach hardly lent itself to more short-term contemporary history (but one might also doubt whether it actually constitutes genuine *conceptual* history).

What about the Cambridge School, the great force for renewing the study of the history of political thought in the English-speaking world? It would be hard to argue that it changed the way contemporary intellectual history is written – even if the School’s undisputed leader, Quentin Skinner, has increasingly stressed the ‘practical significance’ of his work for the present.²⁹ To be sure, after a while it became virtually obligatory to make reference in the methodology section of any dissertation or first book in the history of political thought – even very recent and contemporary political thought – to ‘illocutionary acts’ and to the necessity to understand the ‘point’ of particular texts within discourses. And, for the most part, this was not just rhetoric: hardly anyone would today write intellectual history and disavow any attention to context, or revert to quasi-Platonic conceptions such as Arthur Lovejoy’s infamous (and in certain ways unjustly maligned)

²⁸ His elegant formulation is untranslatable: in one’s own time *Begrifflichkeit* collapsed into *Begreifbarkeit*: *ibid.*, xiv–xv.

²⁹ For instance, Q. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge 1998). The point about practical significance is essentially the same as Koselleck’s: stressing the discontinuity with the past would sharpen political consciousness in the present. Skinner, however, goes far beyond Koselleck in advocating a particular ideology – republicanism – as a replacement for contemporary liberalism. Skinner’s historicism is, I would argue, ultimately incompatible with this kind of advocacy for the present. See also E. Perreau-Saussine, ‘Quentin Skinner in Context’, *Review of Politics*, 69 (2007), 106–22.

‘unit-ideas’. Furthermore, the broad categories of ‘political language’ or ‘discourse’ have proven useful as analytical tools for many periods.³⁰

Having said that, the precepts of the Cambridge School have never made it very clear what exactly is to count as context – a problem arguably exacerbated in the writing of contemporary history, but not exclusive to it.³¹ Thus, while the methodological languages of the Cambridge School were frequently employed, it is hard to think of a work of contemporary intellectual history that really would be clearly indebted to their methods (or one that would have been completely unthinkable without them).

What about the ‘linguistic turn’ and the re-orientation of intellectual history towards cultural history and, broadly speaking, the history of collective representations? On the one hand, postmodernism and post-structuralism seemed to threaten the very normative foundations of precisely the Cold War liberalism which politically had inspired at least some of the old contemporary intellectual history. The avowed empiricism of such a liberalism, its focus on ‘documentary reconstruction’, could hardly co-exist with approaches to history whose practitioners asserted that they were always writing fictions (as Michel Foucault famously claimed he did) or intimated that historians should be in the business of meaning-creation in an age of irony (as Hayden White, admittedly more a structuralist than a post-structuralist, did).³²

In retrospect, it is hard to fathom the sheer sense of panic that particularly some American historians seemed to feel in the face of a supposed postmodern and post-structuralist onslaught on any notion of a ‘real world’ beyond the text. But equally, it is difficult to grasp just why such major political hopes were invested by left-wing members of the academy in the project of finally doing away with traditional notions of authorship and intentionality.³³ Neither side ‘won’, in any obvious sense, the ‘culture wars’, in many ways a parochial US phenomenon, which faded, rather than being concluded by victory or even ceasefire. With gestures of ecumenical generosity, most intellectual historians have seemed willing to take on board some conception of intertextuality; they are willing to acknowledge the

30 An example for an effective use of Pocock’s notion of ‘political languages’ in a contemporary intellectual history is A.D. Moses, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (New York 2007). At the same time, it is not clear that the term does any work that is substantially indebted to either Pocock’s or Skinner’s approaches.

31 Witness also Andrew Vincent’s exasperated remarks: ‘The term context as such, has no reality and is more of a convenient sociological abstraction. Further, can a full account be given of *any* historical context? How would one know when it was complete, or when it was deficient? If we paused for a moment and reflected on the question – what is the context of European or American thought at this present moment? Surely, the issue of identifying a satisfactory context is just very weird, except on the most impressionistic level?’, see A. Vincent, *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford 2004), 46.

32 D. LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, NY 1983); and J.E. Toews, ‘Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience’, *American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), 879–907.

33 There is something to Wehler’s observation that a form of positivism was still so dominant among US historians that the linguistic turn had to appear as an enormous threat; in a way not true of academic cultures long shaped by hermeneutic traditions: see *Historisches Denken am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen 2001), 65.

power of genealogical and discourse analysis; and they pay closer attention to how, very broadly speaking, power might shape thought. Consequently, a comfortable, perhaps all-too-comfortable eclecticism now reigns: anything, it seems, can be combined with anything; conversely, very little seems really at stake in methodological controversies, if they are fought out at all.³⁴ Moreover, none of this, I would argue, has had any deep and lasting impact on the writing of contemporary intellectual history – except for the creation of a genre of highly polemical books warning of the supposed dangers of postmodernism for the politics of the Left.³⁵

To be sure, the cultural (and material) turns have to some degree reshaped thinking about the phenomena with which so much of contemporary history had been preoccupied from the 1950s onwards: fascism and really existing state socialism. A focus on fascism as spectacle and as a form of aestheticized politics tended to be at least implicitly critical of studying fascist thought as a political philosophy comparable to liberalism or Marxism.³⁶ The history of collective representations made close examinations of political doctrines or the thought (and action) of individual intellectuals seem decidedly old-fashioned – and in that sense it actually reinforced the older tendency not to study extremist thought as *thought*. It ended up encouraging a return to a focus on ‘awareness and beliefs’ that would have been all too familiar to Talmon.

The Cold War is over. Different times have brought different historical themes to the fore. The old contemporary intellectual history fashioned during the Cold War still produced some late, post-1989 exemplars;³⁷ but by and large a quite different question started to preoccupy intellectual historians mindful of political developments in the present: namely, how intellectuals de-radicalize; how they relinquish passionate ideological commitment.³⁸ In many ways, it was the opposite of the old question: what needed to be explained were the intellectual (and perhaps emotional) conditions of possibility for *anti*-totalitarianism, rather than the seductiveness of totalitarianism.

It was not evident how best to conceptualize such processes of ‘liberalization’, and what criteria were appropriate for deciding whether liberalization had really been ‘achieved’.³⁹ Apart from ‘liberalization’, a normatively charged concept of ‘Westernization’ was proposed to capture developments in political thought more

34 See for instance A. Brett, ‘What is Intellectual History Now?’, in D. Cannadine (ed.), *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke 2002).

35 For instance, R. Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason* (Princeton, NJ 2004).

36 See for instance S. Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley, CA 1997); and the work of E. Gentile.

37 See for instance Malia's *History's Locomotives: Revolutions and the Modern World* (New Haven, CT 2006); and Z. Sternhell's genealogy of neoconservatism, *Les Anti-Lumières* (Paris 2006). On the former, see J. Cracraft, ‘The Specter of Marxism’, *History and Theory*, 48 (2009), 105–12.

38 An early example: J.Z. Muller, *The Other God that Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ 1987).

39 M. Lilla, ‘The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and its Discontents’, *Daedalus*, 123, 2 (1994), 129–57.

narrowly, but also *mentalités* more broadly.⁴⁰ Such perspectives did not have to presume anything resembling linear progress from illiberalism to liberalism, or the wholesale adoption of pre-existing ideological models: if it is accepted that there are hardly ever completely clear breaks between anti-liberal and liberal thought, the question becomes how precisely certain illiberal thought patterns are selectively re-interpreted, how their functions might change, and whether a creative appropriation of anti-liberal thought cannot also have prophylactic uses within liberal-democratic contexts.⁴¹

The apparent 'success stories' of 'liberalization' have recently been complemented (or perhaps contradicted) by a new genre of books dealing with the resurgence of anti-Western sentiments and ideologies.⁴² This, I would submit, is in many instances a new kind of *Feindwissenschaft* (a science of the enemy), that is to say, contemporary intellectual histories of what the enemies of the West are thinking, similar to the once famous *War against the West* (1938) by Aurel Kolnai.⁴³ They serve the purpose of exposition, but also, arguably, of firing up political passions. Very often, they seek to show how the ideological extremisms of the twentieth century – fascism in particular – have survived outside Europe, and in the Middle East in particular. In terms of methodology, they have never gone beyond the work of Kolnai or Talmon – and in terms of intellectual sophistication, they have usually tended to remain behind.

But finding out what the enemy really thinks is not the only aim of contemporary efforts to study 'the Other'. The opposite intention than that of *Feindwissenschaftler* is behind works associated with the emerging field of 'comparative political theory'. The emphasis here is on studying non-Western texts which can be broadly construed as political thought – but with the aim of making them friends of the West (or at least familiar within canons taught in the West).⁴⁴ This enterprise, as even sympathetic critics have pointed out, seems to be animated by a number of potentially conflicting normative aspirations: the otherness of non-Western texts is at once celebrated and denied, as many intellectual historians engaged in comparative political thought at the same time seem eager to stress how 'they' can teach 'us' novel insights, while insisting on the similarities with Western classics of political thought (implying that these 'Others' are not that 'Other' after all, and hence not threatening).

It is not clear, then, whether the purpose of comparative political thought is to achieve a salutary, thought-provoking 'alienation effect', or rather a kind of

40 For two contending conceptual proposals in this debate, see U. Herbert (ed.), *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland: Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung, 1945–1980* (Göttingen 2002); and A. Doering-Manteuffel, *Wie westlich sind die Deutschen? Amerikanisierung und Westernisierung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 1999).

41 See for instance J. Hacke, *Philosophie der Bürgerlichkeit* (Göttingen 2006).

42 Popular – not necessarily very *wissenschaftliche* – accounts are P. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York 2003); I. Buruma and A. Margalit, *Occidentalism* (New York 2004); and E. Nolte, *Die dritte Widerstandsbewegung* (Berlin 2009).

43 A. Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London 1938).

44 F. Dallmayr, 'Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory', *Perspectives on Politics*, 2 (2004), 249–57.

emancipation of neglected (or completely unknown) authors.⁴⁵ What does seem clear, however, is that many practitioners subscribe to a broadly hermeneutic goal of 'fusing horizons' across seemingly profound cultural divides. It sometimes appears as if Samuel Huntington's theses had simply been turned on their head: a reconciliation of cultures instead of a clash. While politically these two visions seem diametrically opposed, methodologically they are remarkably similar: both tend to assume that 'cultures' are coherent wholes about which Western observers may generalize.

I want to end this rather rapid survey with a plea for a contemporary intellectual history which again takes up the challenge of understanding the ideological extremes of the twentieth century – and their complex legacies in the present.⁴⁶ Arguably, there is a strong trend nowadays to dismiss the role of political ideas altogether in attempts to comprehend the European (or global) twentieth century. Perhaps these dismissals – from the perspective of a political, economic, or even socio-biological historiography – are signs of a move from one extreme to the other.⁴⁷ They seem best understood as a reaction to the fact that *during* the twentieth century – and during the Cold War in particular – the main actor, or rather, culprit, of the stories being offered was 'ideas', or a mixture of ideas and political emotions (such as Furet's 'hatred of bourgeois society').

One way to gain a better understanding of the ideological extremes of the twentieth century, I submit, might be to redeploy some suitably re-forged tools of the Cambridge School, as well as a suitably modified form of conceptual history.⁴⁸ Many of the central ideological movements of the twentieth century can plausibly be comprehended as part of a question-and-answer logic.⁴⁹ In other words, while the focus on intellectual antecedents and genealogies remains important, it also has to be explained how many millions of ordinary men and women (and intellectuals, of course) came to see at least some 'intricate and abstruse books of philosophy' as well as seemingly anti-philosophical (sometimes even barbarian) slogans as answers to their problems. Here Skinner's focus on discourse as serving *legitimation* – a perspective clearly inspired by Max Weber – is highly appropriate, except that we need to go beyond context understood as other (more or less highly philosophical) texts and re-focus on context as lived political experience.

45 A. March, 'Is Political Theory Ever (Not) Comparative?' (paper on file with present author).

46 Compare K.D. Bracher, 'Es begann mit der Weimarer Erfahrung', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 51 (2003), 1–4, where Bracher argues that the 'older contemporary history' from the first half of the twentieth century still shapes our present (what some now call the 'newest contemporary history', which is said to have begun in 1989).

47 A prime example would be N. Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (London 2006).

48 Such a combination has been advocated for quite some time now by Melvin Richter – though not with regard to contemporary history. See *The History of Political and Social Concepts* (New York 1995).

49 This takes up the perspective suggested by Skinner (and Collingwood). Compare, for instance, Skinner's statement at the beginning of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*: 'I take it that political life itself sets the main problems for the political theorist, causing a certain range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate'.

Conceptual history, on the other hand, should be detached from the larger view of modernity associated with *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*; it should take seriously the insight that concepts can always be contested and relocated in new conceptual contexts – even if such attempts are subject to historical-cultural constraints.⁵⁰ Such attempts to fix the meanings of concepts can also be studied in the very recent past and present (even if their success can only be observed in the long term). A focus on concepts – as opposed to intellectuals as well as to ‘awareness’ and emotional attitudes *à la* Talmon – could open up new perspectives on the extremist ideologies of the twentieth century.

To be sure, books like Hobsbawm’s *Age of Extremes* and Furet’s *Passing of an Illusion* are classics and will remain indispensable for anybody trying to gain an understanding – but perhaps even more important, a *feel* – for the inner intellectual dynamics of twentieth-century Europe (no dispassionate account can rival Hobsbawm’s description of what devotion to and inside the Community Party meant, for instance). However, as Anson Rabinbach has recently pointed out, the battle fought between Marxists like Hobsbawm and liberal anticommunists like Furet is not obviously the battle that every historian of twentieth-century Europe has to fight now: it is a good thing that they fought it (and, in a sense, they fought it so that we do not have to fight it any more) – but there is also much to be said for a genuinely post-Cold War perspective, for which twentieth-century European history itself has become sufficiently ‘cold’ to allow a more dispassionate assessment.⁵¹

As suggested above, during the twentieth century many ordinary men and women – and not just intellectuals and political leaders – saw many ‘ideologies’ (and the institutions that were justified with their help) as real answers to their problems. True, ideologies were also expected to provide meaning, even redemption – hence to call some of them ‘political religions’ is justified. But many of the institutions created in their name made a further promise to function much better than those of liberalism – which in the eyes of many Europeans seemed like a hopelessly outdated relic of the nineteenth century.⁵² In retrospect, a sentence such as ‘Fascism came into being to meet serious problems of politics in post-war Italy’ – made by the fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile in the American magazine *Foreign Affairs* in 1927 – seems banal (and, at the same time, a repulsive understatement).⁵³ But any account which completely leaves out the dimension of ideologies as making claims to *problem-solving* and successful institutional experimentation misses one of their essential aspects. Of course, for anyone who has read

50 M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford 1996).

51 A. Rabinbach, *Begriffe aus dem Kalten Krieg: Totalitarismus, Antifaschismus, Genozid* (Göttingen 2009). I adapt the distinction between hot and cold history from Charles Maier’s distinction between hot and cold memory, ‘Mémoire chaude, mémoire froide: Mémoire du fascisme, mémoire du communisme’, *Le Débat*, 122 (2002), 109–17.

52 The existing account that comes closest is M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century* (New York 2000).

53 G. Gentile, ‘The Philosophic Basis of Fascism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 (1927–8), 290–304, at 301.

Weber this should not come as such a surprise – but, arguably, it is one which we can adopt properly only after twentieth-century history has gone, to a large extent, ‘cold’ (and political passions have cooled). In short, we need to restore a sense of why and how ideologies could have been attractive – without thereby making any excuses, of course. Few clichés have done more harm to the serious study of intellectual history than *tout comprendre c’est tout pardonner*.

I also want to suggest that historians of twentieth-century political thought focus less on the history of high political philosophy and more on what one might call ‘in-between figures’: statesmen-philosophers, public lawyers, constitutional advisors, the curious and at first sight contradictory phenomenon of ‘bureaucrats with visions’, philosophers close to political parties and movements, as well as what Friedrich von Hayek once referred to as ‘second-hand dealers in ideas’.⁵⁴ Calling them this was no sign of contempt: Hayek thought they were often much more important than many original producers of ideas. And in fact, there was a particular need for such dealers during an era when ‘mass democracy’ came into its own, because mass democracy, among other things, imposed the need for what we might call *mass justification* (or mass legitimation) – the need, that is, to justify forms of rule and institutions, but also, less obviously, the creation of entirely new political subjects, such as a ‘purified nation’ or a people putting its trust in a single socialist ‘vanguard party’. Once *traditional* conceptions of legitimacy, as well as the principles of dynastic descent had become widely discredited – as they had been after the first world war at the latest – the justifications for political rule had to become different.

The point is not that there was no need for public justification before 1919 or so – of course there was. But in the twentieth century it had to become both more *extensive* and more *explicit*. This was even the case when legitimacy was supposed to be grounded in the personal charisma of a leader, or rely on a functioning state bureaucracy capable of delivering what citizens desired: neither charisma nor welfare-provision speak for or explain themselves. The new pressure for public justification was especially evident with right-wing regimes which precisely sought to rule in the name of tradition, as well as the royal dictatorships which flourished in interwar Europe in particular: tradition and monarchical legitimacy were no longer understood and lived by themselves – they had to be articulated and actively promoted.

In a very specific sense, then, the European twentieth century, after the first world war, was an ‘age of democracy’. To be sure, not all European states had become democratic – on the contrary, many of the newly established democracies were destroyed during the 1920s and 1930s, in the eyes of many Europeans making forms of dictatorship seem the obvious way for the future. But even the political experiments that stridently defined themselves against liberal parliamentary democracy – state socialism as it actually existed and the fully communist society it

54 F.A. Hayek, ‘The Intellectuals and Socialism’, *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 16 (1949), 417–33, at 417.

promised on the one hand, and fascism on the other – played on the register of democratic values. And sometimes they claimed that they were the real thing: Gentile, for instance, explained to his American readers that ‘the Fascist State... is a people’s state, and, as such, the democratic state *par excellence*’.

To be sure, these regimes were not democracies by any stretch – though, of course, many defenders of these regimes did engage in strenuous conceptual stretching precisely to make that claim plausible; and it is here that the tools of *Begriffsgeschichte* can be usefully employed to understand the transposition of concepts into new contexts (and the attempts to create new political meanings). Fascism, but especially state socialism, promised fully to realize values commonly associated with democracy: equality, especially a form of equality more substantive than formal equality before the law; genuine inclusion in a political community; and real, ongoing participation in politics, not least to create a collective political subject – a purified nation or *Volksgemeinschaft*, or a socialist people – capable of mastering a common fate.⁵⁵

Making this point is not to malign democracy. In a sense, it actually underlines the power of democratic ideas. As the Austrian jurist Hans Kelsen, commenting on the employment by communist theorists of democratic vocabularies, put it at mid-century: ‘it seems that the symbol of democracy has assumed such a generally recognized value that the substance of democracy cannot be abandoned without maintaining the symbol’.⁵⁶ Though few people, to put it mildly, would nowadays defend the nazis’ ‘Germanic democracy’ or the postwar Eastern European ‘people’s democracies’, it is *not* superfluous to say that most of the ‘democratic promises’ of the extreme anti-liberal regimes were disingenuous (or, at the very least, dysfunctional in practice). But it is also important to ask why these regimes felt compelled to make these promises in the first place. Their rhetoric points to the larger constraints in an age when demands for participation could simply no longer be ignored; when justifications of rule had to employ a political vocabulary that was at least partly shared with liberal democracy. Arguably, these constraints have become even stronger today, and a contemporary intellectual history that is neither *Feindwissenschaft* nor naïve adulation of the Other – but that is interested in understanding ideology production as undertaken these days in, let us say, Moscow, Beijing or Riyadh – should remain sensitive to this fact and carefully analyze attempts to create new conceptual meanings by recontextualizing ostensibly democratic values.

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⁵⁵ I am indebted here to D.D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York 2006).

⁵⁶ H. Kelsen, ‘Foundations of Democracy’, *Ethics*, 66 (1955), 1–101, at 1.

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