

The Wittrock Lecture Book Series  
No. 1

SWEDISH  
COLLEGIUM  
*for* ADVANCED STUDY

*Historians and the Future*

JÜRGEN KOCKA





Jürgen Kocka

The Wittrock Lecture Book Series  
No. I

S W E D I S H  
C O L L E G I U M  
*for* ADVANCED STUDY

# *Historians and the Future*

JÜRGEN KOCKA

-----

The First Wittrock Lecture,  
held in Uppsala on 15 February 2019.

SWEDISH COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDY (SCAS)

# Contents

Foreword.....9

1. Relations between Past, Present, and Future in the Literature.....11

2. The Emerging Difference and Changing Interrelationship between Past and Future as Decisive Associations in Modern Historical Thought.....13

3. Visions and Proto-visions of the Future Influence the Writing of History.....19

4. Learning from History?.....26

Endnotes.....34

About the Author.....43

Publisher: Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS),  
Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, S-752 38 Uppsala, Sweden  
[www.swedishcollegium.se](http://www.swedishcollegium.se)

ISBN 978-91-981948-1-4

© The author

Copyeditor: Jeremiah Riemer  
Graphic design: Sandra Maria Rekanovic  
Photos: Cover page (Poeform); Page 2/Jürgen Kocka (Lars Wallin)

Printed by KPH Trycksaksbolaget, Uppsala, 2020

## Foreword

The Wittrock Lecture Series was instigated in 2019, in honour of the contributions of Professor Björn Wittrock. As Principal of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in the years 1996-2018, and the driving force ever since its creation in 1985, Björn Wittrock has contributed significantly to the institute's strong position as an internationally renowned institute for advanced study, in addition to the social sciences and the humanities in Sweden, Europe, and beyond. His research has advanced several intellectual fields that include the sociology of ancient, medieval and modern societies, global history, intellectual history, and civilizational analysis.

The Wittrock Lecture Series is arranged annually by the Collegium. At these events, internationally renowned and state-of-the-art scholars are invited to give a public lecture on a theme that resonates with the scholarly profile of SCAS. Topics may range across the humanities and social sciences, and cover a broad spectrum of issues related to global history and modernity, globalization processes and social change, intellectual history, and the plurality of knowledge cultures. The lecture series also aims to address complex challenges facing contemporary society – from the shifting nature of globalization, to crises in democracy, or the future of governance and human civilization.

Christina Garsten  
Principal, SCAS

# Historians and the Future

## 1. Relations between Past, Present, and Future in the Literature

When historians talk about the basics of their profession, they frequently discuss the relationship between past and present. So it was when the Italian historian Benedetto Croce noted approvingly that every kind of history is a history of the present, inasmuch as historians are more enmeshed in the time period they inhabit than in the era about which they are writing. Or as is the case (more recently) when the French historian Francois Hartog takes the opposite stand and deplors “presentism,” the hostile takeover of the past by the present that too often deprives the past of its specifics.<sup>1</sup> Although they may reject both statements as exaggerated, most historians are well aware that the reconstruction of the past which they practice as their profession is a process of constituting relations: relations between past and present, between information about the past as contained in the sources (on the one hand) and (on the other hand) as derived from the questions, viewpoints, and hypotheses that historians, as contemporaries of the present time, introduce into researching and presenting history (without making these choices purely subjective). *Past & Present* is not only the title of an influential historical journal that has existed since 1952. The relation between past and present also defines the context in which many debates take place when scholars deal with theories and methodologies of history as a discipline.

But if one skips through the relevant literature one finds much less on the importance of the future – or rather of anticipating the future – for the study of history. Certainly, re-

flections on historians and the future are not rare at all, but they usually concentrate on the role historical studies may play or should play with respect to understanding, shaping, and perhaps predicting the future, e.g. with questions like: “What can we learn from the past for the future?” I shall deal with this topic in the last part of this lecture. But the literature says much less about the reverse question: on how the future, or rather our anticipation of it, may influence the reconstruction of the past as practiced by historians and other writers.<sup>2</sup> This is what I want to explore in the initial chapters of this lecture.

There are good reasons for talking about the past, present and future together. And for this kind of undertaking we find several examples in the existing literature. The earliest one that came to my attention is a text by a Roman author, Censorinus, who wrote in the first half of the third century C.E. that “the past is without entrance, the future without exit, while the intermediary present is so short and incomprehensible that it seems to be nothing more than the conjunction of past and future, it is so unstable that it is never the same and whatever it runs through is cut away from the future and carried over to the past.”<sup>3</sup>

The Latin language offers concepts for distinguishing between these three dimensions of time. The interconnection between them is discussed again and again, e.g. by the Christian theologian and North African bishop Augustinus, who wrote in his autobiography (“Confessiones”), at the end of the fourth century, about relations between the “mediated presence of the past” as recalled in memory (*memoria*), the future as anticipated in expectations (*expectatio*), and the present (*contuitus*) which, though transitory, gains some quality of duration in lived human experience. He concedes a certain priority to the present, since it is the space from which past and future are noticed and constructed.<sup>4</sup>

Reflections on the role of time in the study and presentation of history take place frequently. Think of Paul Ricoeur, Reinhart Koselleck, Lucian Hölscher, Jörn Rüsen, Peter Burke, Krzysztof Pomian, or more recently of Lynn Hunt’s important lecture on “Measuring Time, Making History.” Frequently, such studies include some consideration of expectations and anticipating the future. Take for example Norbert Elias in his “Über die Zeit”: “The future of today is the present of tomorrow and the present of today is the past of tomorrow... the lines of division between them are fluid and permanently on the move.”<sup>5</sup>

More recently cognitive scientists and brain researchers – e.g., Vivyan Evans – have described the trio of past, present, and future as a universal phenomenon to which neurological processes and locations in the brain correspond, while the semantic presentation of this trio is culturally dependent and variable across space and time.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, ancient texts, theories of history and the works of modern cognitive science emphasize the inter-relatedness of these three dimensions or modi of time experience and demand that they be discussed together. Does the history of historiography confirm this view?

## **2. The Emerging Difference and Changing Interrelationship Between Past and Future as Decisive Associations in Modern Historical Thought**

In *What is History*, his standard work on historiography, E.H. Carr observes that the writers of classical antiquity had little sense of history. This statement may come as a surprise to those not familiar with the culture that generated authors like Herodotus and Thucydides, who are frequently seen, and not with-

out reason, as founding fathers of historical studies and writing. But Carr, who is like most historians in holding that change is central to history and historical studies, goes even further. He argues, for example, that Thucydides “believed that nothing significant had happened in the time before the events which he described, and that nothing significant was likely to happen thereafter.” For the ancients “history was not going anywhere: because there was no sense of the past, there was equally no sense of the future.” “The classical civilization of Greece and Rome was basically unhistorical.”<sup>7</sup>

Moses Finley and other students of Greek and Roman historical thought gave us a picture that was more differentiated, but basically they agreed: ancient authors did not see qualitative differences between the past, the present, and the future.<sup>8</sup> This is why they believed that one could learn directly from the study of history. By finding out how problems were solved in the past, one could hope to prepare oneself for solving – similar – problems in the future. Cicero’s formulation from the mid-first century B.C.E. tried to capture this view: *historia magistra vitae*, history as the teacher of life.<sup>9</sup>

As Karl Löwith has shown in his *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (1953) – a book about the theological implications of the philosophy of history – it was in the context of Hebrew and Christian eschatological thinking that the relation between past, present, and future started to be seen as a movement with a beginning and an ultimate goal. That final aim might be Salvation or the Second Coming, a process in which the future would radically differ from the past while at the same time somehow be connected to what had already transpired. The notion interconnected change and continuity. I already quoted Augustine. He compared human history to a pilgrimage, i.e. a journey towards a goal. Some sense for qualitative

change across time can also be detected in the narratives of other medieval authors.<sup>10</sup>

But this new sense of a qualitative difference between past, present, and future essentially referred to history at a transcendental level. It did not radically change the dominant narratives of the inner-worldly events and sequences described by medieval authors like Gregory of Tours or the Venerable Bede. A modern notion of change had not yet become constitutive for the reconstruction of inner-worldly history.

It was in the period between the Renaissance and Enlightenment that the notion of a *basic difference* between the past, the present, and the future gradually gained ground as a decisive element of modern thinking about history. Scholarship, art, and literature contributed to a largely idealized re-discovery or re-invention of antiquity with which the contemporaries of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries liked to compare themselves, stressing the difference between their own time and the ancient past and advocating the desirability of a renaissance – as well as further development - of the classical world. From this point of view the period “in between” was seen as a period of decline, as a predominantly dark “Middle Age”; this concept, still with us today, appeared at the beginning of the 17th century at the latest. It was this self-comparison contrasting that era’s present with an imagined classical past, and it was the notion of an intermittent period *in between*, that helped forge the perception contemporaries had of themselves as *modern*. The famous “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes,” a Paris-centered discussion about antiquity and modernity starting in the late 17th and resuming in the 18th century, is just one example of an extended discourse conducted by intellectuals in several European countries about aesthetic criteria, cultural standards, institutional change, progress, and the place of the present in the long

term course of historical change from past to future. This is when concepts about what is “modern” and visions of “modernity” started to take shape. In this discourse the social sciences began to emerge.

And so did a modern notion of history: The conviction gained ground that the present was different from the past, and that the future would be different yet again, even though the present had developed out of the past and the future would develop out of the present. Later Montesquieu elaborated the distinction between past and present as a central approach to history. Other Enlightenment authors tried to show that humans can study their past in order to get a sense of history’s future direction. In this view of history, the distinction between what we are and what we could become was essential. Björn Wittrock has spoken of “promissory notes” as a part of this new type of thinking. *Progress* became thinkable, something to be expected and achieved. Development – *Entwicklung* – became a central category. Stages of development were constructed.

This is a complex story of fundamental intellectual change embedded in social and institutional change. The change started to occur long before the Industrial Revolution, frequently under conditions of absolutism. But it was a transformation intertwined with the rise of the bourgeoisie and the formation of a public space, under the influence of considerable transnational communication increasingly spanning both sides of the Atlantic. Here I only want to stress that this complex change entailed, in part, a new notion of history and historical time for which the future was important: as something different from the past and the present, usually as something more advanced, and sometimes as a goal. The relation between past and present was seen as a two-way relationship. On the one hand, it was hoped that the reconstruction of the past would

shed light on the direction history could be expected to follow in the future. On the other hand, the anticipation of the future – expectations as to whether the future warranted hope or fear, perhaps even visions or plans about what lay ahead – yielded the viewpoints and questions used to reconstruct the past and relate it to the present. Lynn Hunt has shown how this type of historical thinking became both a political force shaping the French Revolution and a horror scenario helping to discredit it.<sup>11</sup>

If we look on the late 18th and 19th century, we find competing schemes of historical thought that questioned the built-in universalist claims advanced by Enlightenment thinkers. Take Johann Gottfried Herder and his *Another Philosophy of History*, published in 1774, as an example. He stresses the diversity of human forms as a result of their development under varying circumstances. He gives legitimation to different peoples’ quests for different national pathways of development, in contrast to the emphasis on following one general pattern preferred by Western Enlightenment thought. He sees and welcomes history as an “instrument of the most genuine patriotic spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Or take the founding fathers of German 19th century historiography: Ranke, Niebuhr, and Droysen. Living after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, they were, in many ways, critical of the Enlightenment. They all (each, of course, in his own way) questioned the universalist belief in progress as elaborated by Voltaire, Condorcet, the Scottish philosophers, and Kant. They advocated studying history as a source of particularization, as a body of knowledge that would legitimate und justify different paths to modernity, including a German or Prussian route that would entail modernization with reform but without revolution, with a strong interven-

tionist state capable of modernizing without *laissez-faire*.<sup>13</sup>

Herder, Ranke, and their followers offered an alternative to the Enlightenment view of the past and the future. They were critics of Western Enlightenment thought. But they, too, had a vision of the future as something they fully expected and either hoped or feared would materialize. In the cases mentioned it was the vision of a German nation-state as part of a world made up of established or emerging European nation-states. These historians and many of their readers understood historical studies and historical teaching as a contribution to reaching this goal. At the same time, it was this anticipated and desired future that strongly influenced their viewpoints, the questions they posed, the concepts they used, and even their methods they employed as historians reconstructing the past.

That is what I want to stress: Quite apart from the question of *which* basic beliefs these authors promoted (and these beliefs differed a lot), of *how* they saw progress and modernization, and of *whether* they accepted certain categories (like progress) or rejected them – leaving this question aside, these thinkers all shared a basic epistemological presupposition. This shared assumption was an intellectual experience that the historian Reinhart Koselleck has described as the growing difference, or widening gap, between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectations” – that is, a fundamental difference between the past and the future in spite of their being connected in terms of continuity.<sup>14</sup> To Koselleck’s much quoted formulation I would add (and Koselleck would not have disagreed): Part of this modern mental constellation is the notion that the study of the past influences one’s “horizon of expectations,” while one’s vision of the future (be it in the mode of hope or fear, skepticism or trust) affects the way we reconstruct

the past and relate it to the present.

In this sense, attitudes about the future have become constitutive elements in the study and presentation of history – and this linkage has persisted into the present time. There is much future in history.

Of course, this linkage of a vision of the future to the study of the past becomes more evident if one is engaged in writing comprehensive syntheses or constructing broad contexts. It is less conspicuous if one does what most historians produce most of the time, namely highly specialized empirical work about sharply delineated topics. But even then, I think, visions or proto-visions of the future matter indirectly.

### 3. Visions and Proto-visions of the Future Influence the Writing of History

It would be an interesting experiment to reconstruct the history of historical thought and the history of historiography by concentrating on the question of how changing anticipations of the future (frequently implicit and indirect) have influenced the way in which different authors or schools have reconstructed the past. This has not yet been done. It would require extensive research. It is not possible to do this now. I shall restrict myself to a few sketchy remarks about selected examples in order to make a bit clearer what I have in mind.

a) I already mentioned eighteenth century historiography as influenced by Enlightenment ideas about progress and the future. Take Condorcet’s *Sketch of a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1794) and Immanuel Kant’s essay *The Idea For a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of*

View as examples, but also the much more empirical work of Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789) or of Ludwig Schlözer's *Idea of a Universal History* from 1773. Secularized views and linear conceptions of historical time became widespread; the study of history had not yet become a specialized discipline. Historians were not yet concentrating so exclusively on politics but were broadly interested in social, economic, and cultural dimensions as well. There were many attempts to cover the history of different civilizations, although there was a tendency to assign Europe a special role and a certain air of superiority.<sup>15</sup>

b) I have also mentioned the rise of history as a professional discipline in nineteenth century Europe. The study and the writing of history became strongly influenced by nation building and nationhood as interrelated goals. It was a kind of history that focused on political institutions, political processes, and political decisions. National historical and narrative approaches became dominant. History became a mass discipline with a growing role in schools and the public, but based on increasingly demanding empirical research in archives and universities. I already mentioned German historians from Ranke to Sybel and Treitschke as examples, but I could also mention Guizot, Michelet, and Thiers in France, Stubbs, Freeman, and Seeley in England, perhaps Erik Geijer and Emil Hildebrand in Sweden.<sup>16</sup>

c) A specific anticipation of the future guiding the reconstruction of the past is most obvious in the writings of Karl Marx and his many followers. E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm are outstanding examples. The intrinsic connection between future-related expectations and interpretations of the

past even influenced scholars' choices and their definition of key concepts, such as "capitalism." When this concept emerged in the second half of the 19th century, different definitions were flying around, but what most of them had in common was that they conceived of capitalism in relation to its alternatives, either in the pre-capitalist past or in an anticipated future, usually expected to be socialist. Socialists were not the only ones dealing with capitalism and socialism simultaneously and in an interrelated way; there were other writers talking about capitalism and socialism in the same breath. One example was Albert Schäffle, a German liberal-conservative professor of economics who in 1870 wrote a voluminous book titled *Kapitalismus und Socialismus mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Geschäfts- und Vermögensformen* (*Capitalism and Socialism with Special Attention to Forms of Business and Property*). Without some notion of what might come after capitalism, the concept may not have emerged at all. Visions of the future - anticipations of a future imagined - shaped the concepts that were used for the investigation of the past (and present).<sup>17</sup>

d) The reference to the future could, of course, be a negative one. Take the case of Jacob Burckhardt. A basically conservative world view and very skeptical expectations of a not very consoling future in modern times motivated this nineteenth century Swiss historian to commit himself to reconstructing periods from the distant past in works like *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860) and to stressing how that era differed from Burckhardt's own. In some periods of his life Max Weber tended towards a pessimistic vision of the future as an Iron Cage that would paralyze creativity, endanger human freedom, and make real political leadership unlikely. This skeptical expectation cor-

related inversely with his thesis that capitalism, in its early phase, grew out of moral decisions and individual acts of intellectual freedom with an affinity to the Puritan Ethic.

Or take Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" as an angel of history in 1940. His metaphorical text described the angel of history who was driven, against his will, by a storm towards a dark and threatening future while looking back on the ruins of the past as a series of catastrophes and destructions – again, a specific relation between future and past, especially plausible in a calamitous period like World War II and composed under the influence of imminent personal dangers.<sup>18</sup>

e) I could speak at some length about the way in which social historians of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s related their critical reconstruction of the past to explicit and implicit hopes and goals of emancipation and modernization, however vague at the time or put in perspective later by critical self-reflection. I am thinking of authors publishing in and around the *Annales* (whose most towering figure was Fernand Braudel), of Weberians like Hans-Ulrich Wehler in Germany, and once more of certain Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm, as well as of historical social scientists like Charles Tilly. The concepts "Kritik" (criticism) and "modernity", connecting historical interpretations to future-related perspectives, were central to these groups.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that in this kind of critical social history, or historical social science, the concept of 'backwardness' popped up time and again. This is a concept that allows us to analyze a past constellation not only as a product of previous developments, but also in the light of its still unfulfilled potentialities. In other words, the future of the past – a possible, perhaps desirable, and not at all predetermined future – is per-

ceived or selected as a foil against which the observed constellation of the past is interpreted in a critical but not pessimistic way.

f) Post-modernist historical thought has gained some ground since the 1980s, mostly among theoreticians like Frank Ankersmith and Hayden White, though also among authors of empirical works, especially in the fields of intellectual history, as with Dominic La Capra, or the history of labor, as in the case of Patric Joyce. Post-modern historians conceived of the relationship between the past and the future in a radically different way. They usually shared a deep disenchantment with modernization. They convincingly criticized all kinds of teleological thinking. They stressed discontinuities. In the framework I have chosen for this lecture, one can say that post-modern thinkers had no difficulty stressing differences between the past and the future. At the same time, they tended to loosen, even cut and dissolve altogether, the connection between reconstructing the past and anticipating the future. In this respect they may have represented the most radical challenge to any study of history as traditionally understood in previous centuries. This may help explain why their real impact on historical research and writing has been rather limited.<sup>20</sup>

g) One of the most interesting and promising developments of the last two decades has been the move towards transnational or (in the final analysis) global history. This move undertaken by a rapidly growing minority of historians in different countries has been influenced by changes in the real world: decolonization and post-colonialism; accelerated globalization, in the sense of quickly intensifying interdependence between countries and world-regions, which does not mean increasing

convergence or cohesion; intensified entanglements across borders, economically, politically, and with respect to migration, communication, and knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This move towards transnational and global historical approaches has not been a matter for professional historians alone; it has also been advanced by historically interested social scientists. The shift to approaches that cross borders has offered new opportunities and incentives for cooperation between historians and historically interested social scientists, especially here in Uppsala. Under the leadership of Björn Wittrock, SCAS has become a globally recognized center for different forms of globally oriented cooperation between history and the social sciences. The study of multiple modernities, discussions about the dialectics between progress and war in modernity, but also the fruitful interdisciplinary discourse about the “Axial Age” – a global phenomenon of basic multidimensional change in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE – were all initiated and supported by, as well as housed in, SCAS. It is in such fields that Björn Wittrock left his footprint not only as an influential leader and coordinator of scholarly activities, but also as an original thinker and author. I hope his seminal essays will soon be collected and presented between the covers of a single volume. Without SCAS and Björn Wittrock, the international move towards global history that took place over the last two decades would look quite different and be less substantial.<sup>22</sup>

It is with reference to these recent moves towards global history that the relationship between reconstructing the past and anticipating the future is facing new challenges and may acquire new importance. For example: The paradigm of historical thought discussed in this lecture is clearly Western in origin. This does not necessarily make it less useful or inappropriate for understanding history as a global phenomenon. But the

question arises as to whether analogous or similar notions of history – conceptions also stressing both the basic difference and the interconnection between past, present, and future – emerged in other civilizations as well. A thoroughly comparative discussion of historical paradigms on a global scale will make the European pattern discussed in this lecture appear in a new light.<sup>23</sup>

Different transnational views of the future seem to influence historians’ attempts at reconstructing “our” history in global perspectives. On the one hand, new generations of historians are influenced by increasingly self-evident views of the future as a common future for all humankind, one with innumerable and deep-reaching differences, to be sure, but also with needs, opportunities, and rights that are universal. In this sense, global history can be inspired by a somewhat utopian view of the future. Maybe this kind of hope – not prediction – should play a larger role in the present quest for global history than it does.<sup>24</sup> Frequently, however, dystopian elements appear to be stronger. Increasing concerns over the imminent human-made damages to the natural foundation of human history – to the environment and climate in particular – and demands for a more sustainable future have been instrumental in opening up new interest in global-historical structures and processes of very long duration. The new debate on the history of the Anthropocene reflects such changing views, reaching beyond the temporal extension of human history, but concentrating on its long-term effects.<sup>25</sup> Temporally extended hopes and fears about the future stimulate the extension of frameworks and questions with respect to the past. History is changing as a consequence of these anticipations.

The future has become a much favored object of discussion and investigation among historians and historically

minded social scientists.<sup>26</sup> But it is not yet well understood that our sense of the past is influenced by our views and anticipations of the future, by expectations and imaginations, fears and hopes. In this sense, there is much future in history. This is what the previous chapters were meant to show.

#### 4. Learning from History?

Let me now turn the lens around and ask, on the basis of what has been said so far, what role the study of history can play in preparing us to cope with the future. I want to do this by concentrating on the question of what learning from the past for the future might mean. This is an age-old question that historians rarely ask themselves, though it is frequently asked of them by others.

From what I have said so far it should be clear that the possibilities for learning directly from history – in the sense of *historia magistra vitae* – are very limited. If the discrepancy between the space of experience and the space of expectations is a basic fact, at least under the conditions of rapid change characteristic of modern times, and if this discrepancy is a fundamental condition of historical thought and of history as a discipline, then the solution to past problems will not teach us how new and future problems can be solved. As Hegel wrote: “But what experience and history teach is this – that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it. Each period is involved in such peculiar circumstances, exhibits a condition of things so strictly idiosyncratic, that its conduct must be regulated by considerations connected with itself, and itself alone. Amid the pressure of great events, a general principle gives no help. It is useless to

revert to similar circumstances in the Past. The pallid shades of memory struggle in vain with the life and freedom of the Present.”<sup>27</sup>

If we try nevertheless, we may be led astray. Remember the caesura of 1989-91. On the basis of historical knowledge and historical experience, many of us had assumed and predicted that an empire like the Soviet one would not go down without ruptures, violence, and bloodshed, at least not in a foreseeable period of time. The break now remembered as a “non-violent revolution” – and which led to the fall of the Soviet Union, German unification, and some other fundamental changes – took us by surprise. Because we had tried to learn from history, we got it wrong. *Historia magistra vitae*? Cicero’s maxim proved unreliable – because of the structures I have discussed in this lecture.<sup>28</sup>

Still, this may not be the last word. The expectation that one can learn from history has not disappeared altogether. In spite of disappointing experiences, much skepticism, and even cynicism now and then, it is still widespread.<sup>29</sup> Let me conclude by discussing three intellectual operations that, to a limited extent, may make it possible to draw on historical knowledge as a better way of dealing with the future.

1) It should be noted that there have been outstanding historians who were convinced that it is possible to learn from history. Take Marc Bloch and Reinhart Koselleck as two examples. In his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien* (1940-41) Marc Bloch engaged not only in emphatic self-criticism; he also accused his generation of failing to warn in time against the self-deceptive unpreparedness of French society, which led to its subjugation by the Germans. In 1941, when he decided to join the Résistance against the Nazi German occupation, de-

plored how “in the midst of a terrible tragedy into which our own insanity has plunged us, we hardly succeed in understanding ourselves. But, above all, we would like to foresee our destiny and perhaps shape it a bit. In this confusion and with this thirst to know or to guess, we turn to the past. And an old inclination lets us hope that it [the past] – if appropriately questioned – will be able to deliver us the secrets of the present and to air out - at least a bit - those of the future.”<sup>30</sup>

Essentially, he was convinced that historical reflection and investigation can lead to the discovery of regularities – regularities always valid only within a limited period of time – that might provide some orientation despite the many countervailing tendencies of which he was aware.

Reinhart Koselleck undertook a great deal of theoretical work showing why history cannot be life’s teacher – *historia magistra vitae* – in the ancient sense. I quoted him earlier and made use of his notion about the modern gap between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations. Koselleck’s skepticism about the teachability of history makes it all the more surprising to learn how, in the last decade of his life, he repeatedly stressed that there are *Wiederholungsstrukturen*, structures of repetition, which do allow limited predictions on the basis of historical knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Would not many of us share this conviction? Would we not make certain statements of probability and, in this limited sense, also be making predictions on the basis of historical experience and knowledge? How often, for example, have we not made assertions about the usefulness of foreign policy successes for governments who have trouble managing social and political tensions at home and therefore look to triumphs abroad as a way of resuscitating flagging domestic support? Or ventured forecasts about the probability of the next crisis in

capitalism without predicting its exact character? Or held forth on the very limited usefulness, if not utter uselessness, of direct forms of participation (e.g. plebiscites or council democracy) when it comes to creating stable democratic relations in complex and large-scale societies over longer periods of time?<sup>32</sup>

Such statements would not be based on laws claiming validity for ever. They would not be statements about anthropological constants *or* formulations of isolated cause-and-effect relations working independently from context. On the contrary, we have to accept the idea that there are only *limited time spans* within which our statements can claim validity. We would also expect that such regularities work *within specific contexts* – contexts that determine in what way, to what degree, and even whether these regularities become operational at all. And we would further have to be satisfied with *probability* statements, accepting a residual of uncertainty impossible to overcome.

Nonetheless, such knowledge of conditional regularities on the basis of historical experience and reflection may provide us with some orientation. This may be less guidance than what Cicero probably had in mind when he ascribed to history the noble office of *magistra vitae*, teacher of life. But such knowledge may help to make prudent actions more likely – and this is one way of learning from history.

2) When the Great Recession hit in 2008, it was not only scholars and commentators, but also top-decision makers (like Ben Bernanke, an economic historian and then chair of the US Federal Reserve Board) who turned to historical knowledge as a way of understanding what was happening and how to respond. Historical comparison was also an essential component of the main strategy adopted. Bernanke and other policy makers compared the turmoil in the present crisis from which

we have barely recovered with the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> What were the dominant intellectual operations, what were the results?

It was a decisive step, and not self-evident, to identify each turmoil as a crisis of (or within) capitalism.

Then it was critical to describe and monitor similarities: in each case there was a dramatic plunge in stock values, there were loans that failed, banks that failed, disruptions in trade, declining earnings, wages, and salaries, and growing unemployment.

The next step (or rather another part of the analysis) was to identify some causes as well as some of the highly problematic social and political consequences of the 1930s economic crisis. Here the analysis started to tread on more difficult ground; there are different opinions about causes and consequences that are still competing with each another. And the comparison also led to the discovery of differences, of dissimilarities between the two cases: there were different types of capitalism then and now, different degrees and forms of globalization, attitudes towards saving and spending had changed, and the U.S. had assumed a very different role in the world economic and political order (to name just a few of the contrasts).

These uncertainties and dissimilarities limited the scope for action (both retroactive and future) in the next and most important steps of the comparative analysis: What could and should have been done in the 1930s to avoid the catastrophic effects of the choices made by that era's decision makers? And what should now be done in order to avoid similar consequences in the present and future?

No easy answers were available, either for historians or policy makers. But, as is well known, the lack of government intervention in the early 1930s was identified as a major mis-

take. Consequently, decisions in favor of massive government intervention – large public loans, rescues of banks and other institutions too big to fail, availability of easy money – were taken that were often successful but also had unintended consequences. The repercussions for some countries included a rise in sovereign debt and fundamental currency problems, most notably a profound crisis in the eurozone. These were unintended consequences for the future that historical analysis may have failed to point out.

There is no need to go into greater detail. The main point should have become clear: Intertemporal comparison, which like most comparisons deals with similarities and differences, is a good strategy if the aim is learning from the past for the present and the future. It helps to sharpen one's categories and shows how important changing contexts are. Certainly, such analytic operations do not overcome uncertainty, nor do they exclude the possibility of wrong conclusions. But they allow us to come up with informed advice for future-related actions in the present. Whether such advice can be translated into real politics is another question.

3) Finally, there is still another meaning of "learning from history." I already mentioned the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. In 1868 he proposed that we understand the expression "Historia magistra vitae" in a sense he described as simultaneously "higher" and "more modest." As he wrote: "Wir wollen durch Erfahrung nicht sowohl klug (für ein andermal) als weise (für immer) werden." "We want experience to make us not so much clever (for the next time) as wise (for ever)."<sup>34</sup>

It is not entirely clear what Burckhardt had in mind. Most likely he was alluding to the knowledge and education of historians who dare to look beyond their narrow fields of specialization and are trained to deal with long-term change,

are familiar with the complicated reciprocal relations between structures and actions, and have learned to deal with the gap that usually exists between intentions and the results. Burckhardt may have had in mind that the central task of historians is not to isolate factors as variables from one another (as many social scientists do), but to contextualize them and to study what in German is called *Zusammenhang* (context or connection), including the *Zusammenhang* between experiences of the past and anticipations of the future. Skills like these can be acquired and trained through careful study of the past. Such skills may be useful for shaping reasonable expectations, making good choices, and guiding effective actions – and for being prepared to cope with possible disappointments in the future.

This lecture has emphasized the basic difference between past, present, and future as an epistemological presupposition of history as a modern discipline. It is this pattern of temporal differentiation that makes it possible for future-related expectations to have an impact on the way the past is conceptualized and history reconstructed. At the same time, this basic pattern of temporal differentiation is the main impediment to deriving lessons for the future directly from the study of the past – since history “does not repeat itself.” But apparently the basic difference between past, present, and future does not rule out structures of repetition within limited spans of time and in some respects – despite the normality of rapid change and non-repetition in other respects. If we want to continue this debate, it will be necessary to distinguish among different extensions of the various futures being anticipated: Future orientations that are lengthy and remote differ from those that are immediate and near, with intermediating grades in between. And it will prove helpful to distinguish system-

atically between and among different dimensions of historical reality, each of which may have its own type of temporality, distinguishable from others. Consequently, the role of future-related imaginations, expectations, and visions for reconstructing history will have to be discussed in different ways by economic, social, cultural, and political historians and by historians of capitalism, religion, or democracy. This is a field where many discoveries are still to be made. Life experience and scholarship tell us that history usually enters the future and influences the paths it takes. But we also need to take seriously how much future there is in history. Imagined futures influence our interpretations of the past.

## Endnotes

1 Benedetto Croce, *La Storia come pensiero e come azione* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2002), 13; Francois Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003) as quoted by Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), 18. Part of the following text (in an earlier version) has been used to discuss the category of “backwardness”: Jürgen Kocka, “Zukunft in der Geschichte,” in David Feest and Lutz Häfner (eds.), *Die Zukunft der Rückständigkeit: Chancen. Formen. Mehrwert. Festschrift für Manfred Hildermeier zum 65. Geburtstag* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2016), 27-35.

2 There are exceptions. Cf. Reinhard Wittram, “Die Zukunft in den Fragestellungen der Geschichtswissenschaft” in id. et al., *Geschichte – Element der Zukunft* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1965), 7-32; Jörn Rüsen, “Kann Gestern besser werden?” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002): 305-321; Johannes Rohbeck, *Zukunft der Geschichte: Geschichtsphilosophie und Zukunftsethik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), reviewed by Jörn Rüsen in “Future by History,” *History and Theory* 54 (February 2015): 106-115.

3 According to Norbert Elias, “Über die Zeit,” in id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 100. The quote from Censorinus (*De Die Natalie*) is adapted here from the English edition of Elias’s essay, translated in part by Edmund Ephcott, in Norbert Elias, *Time: An Essay* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1992), as cited by A) Daniel Woolf, “Afterword: Shadows of the Past in Early Modern England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*,

76, 4 (Winter 2013): 643 (fn. 9) – see <[https://hlq.pennpress.org/media/34138/hlq-764\\_p639\\_woolf.pdf](https://hlq.pennpress.org/media/34138/hlq-764_p639_woolf.pdf)> (accessed Sept. 2019) – and B) Gerda Reith, “Homo Aleator: a sociological study of gambling in Western society” (PhD dissertation, Glasgow University, 1996), 225 – see <<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2173/1/1996reithphd.pdf>> (accessed Sept. 2019). Woolf attributes the quote from *De Die Natalie* to p. 79 of *Time: An Essay*, Reith to p. 77 of the English edition of this publication by Elias.

4 Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 277-78. Cf. Zachary S. Schiffman, “Historizing History/Contextualising Context,” *New Literary History* 12 (2011): 477-498, 483f.

5 For a good introduction with bibliographical references, cf. Lucian Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung der Zukunft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2nd ed. 2016). As to Elias, see note 3 above. (The translation of Elias used here is the author’s own.)

6 Cf. Vyvyan Evans, *The Structure of Time: The Language, Meaning and Temporal Cognition* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), 186, 196.

7 Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 109 f.

8 Moses I. Finley, “Myth, Memory and History,” *History and Theory* 4 (1965), 281-302. Another one of Western historical thought’s roots is analyzed in Isaac Kalimi, *Writing and Rewriting the Story of Solomon in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 312-315; see also id., “Placing the Chronicler in His Own Historical Context: A Closer Examination,” *Journal of Near Eastern*

*Studies* 68 (2009): 179-192. I am grateful to Prof. Kalimi for his comments.

9 Reinhart Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont neuzeitlich bewegter Geschichte," in: id., *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 38-66.

10 Karl Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1953). Schiffman, „Historicizing," 483-486.

11 Reinhart Koselleck, "Erfahrungsraum und Erwartungshorizont" (1976) in id., *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 349-375; Hunt, *Measuring Time*, 47-92; Björn Wittrock, "History, War and the Transcendence of Modernity," *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, 1 (2001): 53-72, 62.

12 Cf. Jürgen Brummack, "Herders Polemik gegen die 'Aufklärung,'" in: Jochen Schmidt, ed., *Aufklärung und Gegenaufklärung in der Europäischen Literatur: Philosophie und Politik von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 277-293.

13 Cf. Georg G. Iggers et al., *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson, 2008), 125, 73-74; Georg G. Iggers, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft: Eine Kritik der traditionellen Geschichtsauffassung von Herder bis zur Gegenwart* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997); Jörn Rüsen, "Droysen heute – Plädoyer zum Bedenken verlorenen Themen der Historik," in: id., *Kultur macht Sinn: Orien-*

*tierung zwischen Gestern und Morgen* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2006), 39-61.

14 Cf. note 11 above.

15 Cf. Iggers and Wang, *A Global History*, 22-32.

16 Ibid., 69-82; Donald A. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Enquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2003).

17 Cf. Jürgen Kocka, "Eric J. Hobsbawm (1917-2012)," *International Review of Social History* 58 (April 2013): 1-8; Q. Edward Wang and Georg Iggers (eds.), *Marxist Historiographies: A Global Perspective* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Jürgen Kocka, "Capitalism: The History of the Concept," in James D. Wright, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., 3 (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 105-110.

18 Cf. Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Alteuropa und Moderner Welt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974); Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Max Weber, Der Historiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Walter Benjamin, "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen (IX)," in id., *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1961), 272 f.

19 Georg G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography*. Rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 43-174; Friedrich Lenger, "'Historische Sozialwissenschaft': Aufbruch oder Sackgasse?," in Christoph Cornelißen (ed.), *Geschichtswissenschaft im Geist der Demokratie: Wolfgang J. Mommsen und seine Generation* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 115-132.

20 Cf. Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History: The Post-Modernist Challenge and its Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

21 Cf. Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sven Beckert and Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Global History Globally* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Jürgen Kocka “Globalisierung als Motor des Fortschritts in der Geschichtswissenschaft?” *Nova Acta Leopoldina*, NF 414 (2017): 215-226.

22 Björn Wittrock, “The Axial Age in World History,” in Craig Benjamin (ed.), *The Cambridge World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 101-119; id., “Modernity: One, None or Many? European Modernity as a Global Condition,” *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 129, 1 (Winter 2000): 31-60; Jürgen Kocka, “History and the Social Sciences Today,” in Hans Joas and Barbro Klein (eds.), *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53-67.

23 Cf. several contributions to Wolfgang Küttler, Jörn Rüsen, and Ernst Schulien (eds.), *Geschichtsdiskurs*, vols. 1-5 (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 1992-1999), esp. vol. 2, 165-215 (on Chinese and Islamic Views); Chun-chieh Huang and Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Chinese Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Discussion* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment

in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 999-1027.

24 Two sociologists have dealt with this utopian element in global historical approaches: Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, “Jenseits des methodologischen Nationalismus: Außereuropäische und europäische Variationen der Zweiten Moderne,” *Soziale Welt* 61 (2010): 187-216.

25 Cf. Katrin Klingan et al. (eds.), *Textures of the Anthropocene: Grain Vapor Ray* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015); Jürgen Renn and Bernd Scherer (eds.), *Das Anthropozän: Zum Stand der Dinge*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz: 2017).

26 Two recent examples: Rüdiger Graf and Benjamin Herzog, “Von der Geschichte der Zukunftsvorstellungen zur Geschichte ihrer Generierung: Probleme und Herausforderungen des Zukunftsbezugs im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 42 (2016): 497-515; Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016).

27 “Was die Erfahrung aber und die Geschichte lehren, ist dieses, daß Völker und Regierungen niemals etwas aus der Geschichte gelernt und nach Lehren, die aus derselben zu ziehen gewesen wären, gehandelt haben. Jede Zeit hat so eigentümliche Umstände, ist ein so individueller Zustand, daß in ihm aus ihm selbst entschieden werden muß und allein entschieden werden kann. Im Gedränge der Weltbegebenheiten hilft nicht ein allgemeiner Grundsatz, nicht das Erinnern an ähnliche Verhältnisse, denn so etwas wie eine fahle Erinnerung hat keine Kraft gegen die Lebendigkeit und Freiheit der

Gegenwart.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837) (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 17. English translation: George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans J. Sibree (Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 19-20, accessible at <<https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hegel/history.pdf>> (accessed September 21, 2019).

28 Cf. Jürgen Kocka, “Überraschung und Erklärung: Was die Umbrüche von 1989/90 für die Gesellschaftsgeschichte bedeuten könnten,” in Manfred Hettling et al. (eds.), *Was ist Gesellschaftsgeschichte? Positionen, Themen, Analysen* (Munich: Beck, 1991), 11-21.

29 Examples may be found in Martin Sabrow, “Historia vitae magistra? Zur Rückkehr eines vergangenen Topos in die Gegenwart,” in Frank Bösch and Martin Sabrow (eds.), *ZeitRäume: Potsdamer Almanach des Zentrums für Zeithistorische Forschung 2016* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016), 10-20. Sabrow demonstrates convincingly how much the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany is based on permanent references to German history’s “darkest” period, 1933-1945, and on continuous efforts to avoid similar developments in the future: a specific and effective way of learning from history.

30 Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien*, ed. by Etienne Bloch (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993), 281 f. Quoted and analyzed by Peter Schöttler, “Marc Bloch, die Lehren der Geschichte und die Möglichkeit historischer Prognosen,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 16 (2005): 104-125, especially 115-118. The passage cited here is an English rendering of a new German translation of Bloch’s *Apologie* published in 2002 and based on a French student edition from 1997 incorporating a fragment first pub-

lished in 1993. (See Schöttler for details.)

31 Reinhart Koselleck, “Wiederholungsstrukturen in Sprache und Geschichte,” *Saeculum: Jahrbuch für Universalgeschichte* 57, 1 (2006): 1-16.

32 Cf. Jürgen Kocka, “Erinnern – Lernen – Geschichte: 60 Jahre nach 1945,” *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 16 (2005): 64-78.

33 Cf. Ben S. Bernanke, *The Courage to Act: A Memoir of a Crisis and Its Aftermath* (New York: WW. Norton, 2015). Bernanke had studied the Great Depression of the early 1930s as an economic historian. See, too: Bernanke, *Essays on the Great Depression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), Pts.1 and 2; Jürgen Kocka, “Learning from History and the Recent Crisis of Capitalism,” *Storia della Storiografia* 61, 1 (2012): 103-109; and Barry Eichengreen, *Hall of Mirrors: the Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the Uses - and Misuses - of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

34 Jacob Burckhardt, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, ed. by Rudolf Marx (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1978), 10. (The translation of Burckhardt used here may be found in Gerhard A. Ritter (ed.), *German Refugee Historians and Friedrich Meinecke: Letters and Documents 1910-1977*, trans. Alex Skinner (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 130, fn. 1.)

## About the Author

JÜRGEN KOCKA

*Professor Emeritus of History, Freie Universität Berlin*

Jürgen Kocka taught Social History at the Universität Bielefeld and History of the Industrial World at the Freie Universität Berlin. He was a Permanent Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, President of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung and Vice-President of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften. He has held visiting posts at various institutions, among them SCAS and the University of California, Los Angeles. Presently, he is a Permanent Fellow of the centre 'Work and Human Life Cycle in Global History' at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and a Senior Fellow of the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam.

He has published widely in the field of modern history, particularly the social, economic and cultural history of Germany as well as the comparative history of the 18th–20th centuries. His publications in English include *Facing Total War: German Society, 1914–1918* (1984); *Industrial Culture and Bourgeois Society: Business, Labor, and Bureaucracy in Modern Germany* (1999); *Civil Society and Dictatorship in Modern German History* (2010); and *Capitalism: A Short History* (2016).

He has received honorary degrees from several European universities (including Uppsala University) and a number of prizes, among them the Holberg Prize. He is a member of several academies, for instance the Leopoldina – Nationale Akademie der Wissenschaften, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, and the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and Arts. He is also an Honorary Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford.

## The Wittrock Lecture Book Series

No. 1 - 2019

JÜRGEN KOCKA: *Historians and the Future*



ISBN 978-91-981948-1-4  
[www.swedishcollegium.se](http://www.swedishcollegium.se)