


SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

The future is just another past

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Abstract

Before International Studies can confront the future, it needs to get a better grip on its past and present. The discipline lacks agreement on both its own name and the name of its object of study. More importantly, key concepts used to describe phenomena have changed continuously: no concept emerging in the 19th century has remained untouched, no envisioned future of the past could have prepared us for the present. Old concepts have been discarded, new ones adopted, and existing ones modified. This implies that any exercise in ‘futurology’ must necessarily come with an openness towards conceptual change, and that a key challenge for International Studies going forward will consist in matching our conceptual toolbox to an ever-changing world. The importance of conceptual change has until recently been neglected in the study of global politics. Thus, in this paper we start by presenting the empirical case for incorporating conceptual change by laying out key past and present conceptual changes in the international realm. We then move on to a presentation of conceptual history and the tools it provides us for grasping conceptual change, before discussing how to tackle conceptual developments when thinking about the future of global politics.

Keywords: conceptual history; future; historical international relations; past; present

Introduction

The idea that the world moves ever faster is prevalent at the quarter mark of the 21st century. Only a few years ago, it would take hours to find a book in a library, while now we can download and read it on our computers in an instant. While a couple of years ago it took weeks to transfer money transcontinentally, it can now be done within seconds. Within five months in 2020, Covid-19 had spread much further than the Black Death of the 14th century did in five years. The list could go on. As the world moves faster, it seems the future moves closer towards us. The five-year plans of the 20th century seem a rather slow mode of governance today. To query the status of the future is thus a timely enterprise. There is certainly much to be said about how the future constitutes a different way of knowing than what our past-oriented scientific methods have to offer: futurologists scan current trends to draw a cautious picture about the future, sci-fi enthusiasts are thrilled to point out that some of the foreseen trends become reality; companies engage in strategic planning; and scenarios are increasingly used as a mode of governance. Trends and scenarios are beyond the verification and falsification that we have learned so much about as the apparent ‘foundation’ of scientific inquiry. So how do we think about the future? What is its status for our understanding of how the world operates?

Let us open the discussion with a truism: with an eye to how the future was imagined in the past, we also know that today’s imagined future will have little to do with the lived experiences in a distant

future present.¹ The difference between the present future and the future present is due to the fact that we always imagine the future from the given present, and that present is informed by our past. Of course, that the future we imagine is irremediably linked to the past we do or do not remember hardly comes as a surprise. In fact, the old and overused saying that those who forget about history are bound to repeat its mistakes is deeply ingrained in International Relations (IR). Morgenthau's classical realism might serve as an example, with his intent to revisit (diplomatic) history to avoid the outbreak of a new major war within the then-present predicament.² Similarly, our times of global decoupling and increasing tensions let the future appear like the too-well-known past: if there were ever different cultures of anarchy, it seems the Hobbesian world is much closer today than that of anarchy in the Lockean or Kantian sense.³

On the other hand, focusing on recurrence tells only part of the story.⁴ Consider as a thought exercise how much the world has changed in the last 25 years and project that onto the years ahead. Twenty-five years ago, mobile telephones and the Internet were relatively new mass phenomena. Today, we cannot imagine our present without them. Imagine then what the world might look like as we approach 2050: depending on who you ask, the climate catastrophe will be fully upon us, cars will be self-driving if not even flying, artificial intelligence (AI) systems will eventually write all scholarly articles, war robots will have taken over, and algorithms will have replaced cash as the standard form of tender. We live in a time of fast innovation, and we can hardly grasp the ways in which the world order is about to change. In fact, we can be quite certain that everything that is written about the future today will hardly capture the everyday in 2123 or 2075.

This difference between the present future (how we imagine the future today) and the future present (how that future looks like) can be easily acknowledged in the wake of uncertainty, coincidences, and contingencies.⁵ That things do not turn out the way we imagine them in the first place is hardly news, but it comes with two corollaries. First, if the future can be imagined from the present only, and if these conditions change over time, then how and what future we imagine changes over time. This means that the question about the future is linked to the question of change, and how the latter is conceptualised sets the bounds for understanding the former.⁶ Does change happen through 'big bangs' or through drawn-out processes, spanning centuries? How can we distinguish change *in* the system from change *of* the system? Does change arise relate to material or ideational factors, is it intentional, accidental, or evolutionary? Depending on where you stand, ideas about the future will vary. IR has explored these questions via an entire set of different social theories that we cannot do justice here. It might be sufficient to say that once prominent debates about agents and structures, norms, or ideas provide specific answers to the these set of questions and thus have tried to advance our understanding of (dis)continuity and change.⁷ They therefore have already allowed us to think differently about the future.

Second, what is more important – and for us the key argument here – is that the question of how to think about the future is in its *form* a historical one for two reasons: on the one hand, there is not only the present future we imagine today vis-à-vis the future present, but if the future is imagined

¹Future present refers to a 'present' in a future moment in time. The present future refers to how the future is currently imagined.

²His present predicament included such elements as the centres moving outside Europe and therefore detaching the balance of power from its European social fabric; morality becoming totalitarian; and nationalism changing warfare.

³On cultures of anarchy, see Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴The following paragraph is intended as a thought experiment and not as a substantive argument.

⁵Oliver Kessler, 'The contingency of constructivism: On norms, the social and the third', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:1 (2016), pp. 43–63.

⁶This includes not only the concept but also the question about the future. As we want to argue in this contribution, the question itself rests upon historically contingent 'discursive sediments'. Given that we do not share the same history, the future has seen different conceptualisations across space and time. In this contribution, we simply outline this contingency and propose an avenue for future inquiry based on conceptual history.

⁷Kessler, 'The contingency'.

from the present, that present instantly becomes a past, a new present materialises, and with it the imaginations of the future change continuously. In that sense, the future can never ‘arrive’.⁸ On the other hand, it is historical also in the sense that the question itself presupposes a specific relation between the past, present, and future that itself is subject to change. The very question about the future is part of a ‘regime of historicity’ and situated in a particular understanding of how space and time relate to each other.⁹ The very way we think and wonder about the future today would have been impossible in the 15th century: the idea of an open and unknown future was alien then. Hence, the future is not only a problem to be continuously reimagined as time moves linearly forward.

There is also much to be said about (social) imaginations and time in this regard.¹⁰ While we acknowledge this important dimension, we want to explore another avenue in this contribution and argue that the future can be understood as a concept. As a concept, it is subject to ruptures, discontinuities, and reframings that not only open the question about the future towards multiple temporalities (or regimes of historicities for that matter), but that makes it necessary to (conceptually) allow for systemic change in the sense of conceptual revolutions and reconfigurations. To understand the future as a concept also opens the discussion for questions of conceptual history, and this comes with two promises.

First, it allows us to advance the idea that change – be that in the past, present, or future – always comes at least partly in the form of conceptual innovations, dislocations, and rewritings. Without taking into account dynamics of *conceptual* change, IR remains limited in its understanding of past international relations, current challenges, and possible futures. It is through concepts that we reconstruct the past and imagine the future. They allow us to reconstruct the boundaries of the visible and the sayable, and they allow us to trace how that boundary has shifted over time.¹¹ We can today trace these conceptual changes everywhere from conceptual innovations such as ‘cyberwar’, ‘shadow banking’, Anthropocene, and planetary politics,¹² to the continuous redescription of basic concepts such as ‘sovereignty’.¹³ Conceptual changes are a necessary intermediary that (de)stabilise institutional facts through which, as Searle noted, we can say that *x* counts as *y* in context *c*.¹⁴

Second, conceptual history offers a specific avenue to trace radical change via the concept of the Saddle Time (ca. 1750–1850), when a transformation of the entire socio-political vocabulary, and not merely individual conceptual changes, took place. In the study of European *domestic* political languages, it has been established that the decades around 1800 witnessed such a systemic shift.¹⁵ This was, however, not only a period of domestic conceptual revolution, but also the period in which concepts such as ‘international’, ‘foreign policy’, and ‘diplomacy’, and thus the modern manifestation of an *international* domain juxtaposed against a domestic domain, started to settle; the first emergence of a full-fledged vocabulary for international relations. The period between 1750 and 1850 constituted a first conceptual revolution: before and after, individual terms may have

⁸Niklas Luhmann, ‘The future cannot begin: Temporal structures in modern society’, *Social Research*, 43:1 (1976), pp. 130–52.

⁹On regimes of historicity, see François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹⁰Oliver Kessler and Halvard Leira, ‘Stories we live by: The rise of historical IR and the move to concepts’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2024, online first); Kessler, ‘The contingency’; Charles Dannreuther and Oliver Kessler, ‘Racialised futures: On risk, race and finance’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2015), pp. 356–79.

¹¹Visible and sayable here refers to Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1974).

¹²The literature on the conceptual innovations and explorations in the context of climate change is too large to be adequately summarised here. Yet see the differences in Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audria Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel Levine, ‘Planetary politics: A manifesto from the end of IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523; Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaja: Eight Lecture on the New Climate Regime* (London: Policy, 2017). Tom Lundborg, ‘The Anthropocene rupture in international relations: Future politics and international life’, *Review of International Studies*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 597–614.

¹³See the redescription in the context of the Responsibility to Protect in terms of ‘bundle of rights’.

¹⁴John Searle, ‘What is an institution’, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 1:1 (2005), pp. 1–22 (pp. 5–10).

¹⁵We want to emphasise that we understand Saddle Time not as a period, but as an epistemological rupture.

stayed the same, but their meanings changed: just think about the transformation of sovereignty or justice, which have a long history but have changed their meaning over time.¹⁶ Below, we suggest that we may currently be witnessing the onset of a new conceptual revolution in the international vocabulary and that therefore conceptual history offers a doubly useful entry point to think about the future as a concept. If our suspicion is correct, then this poses distinct problems for understanding the changing configuration of the past, present, and future.

Our contribution unfolds in three steps: we first outline the question of continuity and discontinuity in the conceptualisation of the future and show the lacunae that concepts still present in the past and present of IR theorising. The second step fosters a dialogue with conceptual history as an approach before we, in the third step, discuss how conceptual history offers tools for thinking about conceptual change across different temporalities, suggesting where taking concepts seriously can help us come to terms with possible futures. More specifically, in the second and third step we lay out the two different ways in which conceptual history helps us think about both the past and the future of international relations. The first concerns change in specific concepts and sensitises us both to ways in which the past was conceptualised differently from our present and to how the concepts used to grasp future international relations are likely to be different (or have different meaning) than the concepts we apply today. This is a take on concepts as potentially both drivers of change and indexes of change. The second deals with the totality of conceptual change over a specific period of time, and how it can be related to a reconceptualisation of time itself. This approach is useful both for grasping the transformation of conceptual language in Europe around 1800, and how it was interwoven with a radical shift in how 'the future' was conceptualised, and for probing the possibility of a comparable period of change being underway today.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose? On the future, change, and discontinuity

There are always two stories to tell, as Smith and Hollis famously reminded us.¹⁷ The first story is that of continuity. During most of the 20th century, IR took as its starting point states interacting in an anarchical system or society.¹⁸ The key variable for understanding change would then be the distribution of material power, and change would typically take place through war. As recounted in any IR intro course, this framework has been challenged and modified on a number of points. Some have pointed out that even under anarchy, cooperation might be as common as conflict,¹⁹ while others have added that although states are formally equal, conditions of hierarchy among states are more common than a pure anarchy.²⁰ Yet others have argued that for long periods of time, others forms of political units, such as empires, have been more common than states.²¹ However, even if other units are introduced, they are typically analysed in the same ways as states. Adding in ideational factors, it has been argued that anarchy in itself is not determinant of any form of

¹⁶Sovereignty for example moved from personal property (*L'état c'est moi*) to an impersonal institutional form that comes with a set of rights. Justice transformed from 'knowing one's place in society' to 'equality'.

¹⁷We are aware that the two stories they outlined were the ones based on agents and those of structures and not the ones we outline here. They pointed out that the same concepts acquire different meaning depending on whether we start from agent-based or structural approaches. Hence their critique of the agent–structure problem à la Wendt. While we agree with that critique, we find it more useful to rephrase the two stories as stories about continuity and change. Martin Hollis and Steve Smith, 'Two stories about structure and agency', *Review of International Studies*, 20:3 (1994), pp. 241–51.

¹⁸Among many, see in particular Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1977).

¹⁹Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²⁰David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²¹Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the imperial: Empire and international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 109–27.

interaction, but that states themselves shape the form of the anarchy,²² and also that ideational factors such as perceived legitimacy might help usher in system-wide change.²³

A key example of how notions of underlying continuity inform the discipline can be found in the myth of 1648. Based on Leo Gross's influential account from 1948,²⁴ it has been assumed that modern international relations emerged in 1648, when the treaties of Westphalia ushered in an era of sovereign states, coexisting in an anarchical state system. And even this 'novel' system was seen as harking back to the Italian city-state system of the 15th century and the Greek city-state system of the 5th century BCE, with continuity or reappearance of institutions such as diplomacy and organising principles such as anarchy. The system allegedly established in 1648, the claim goes, is the system we still live in. Although belied by much later research, this disciplinary myth has persisted and continues to shape the discipline:²⁵ in spite of the many repeated demonstrations of how the 'treaties' never constituted the modern state system, many recent contributions still base their inquiries on the same myth.²⁶

The second story is that of discontinuity. While the practice of periodisation has been challenged,²⁷ it is still commonplace in historical sciences to discuss an early modern period starting around 1500, transitioning to modernity around 1800. Key to that latter transition was the gradual emergence and separation of states and societies during the Enlightenment,²⁸ and a concurrent transformation of the basic categories of knowledge.²⁹ As restated recently,³⁰ even though there are clear continuities belying the notions of a clear break, and further major changes during the 19th century,³¹ the Enlightenment was the threshold period for the emergence of what we refer to as modernity.

In IR, the Enlightenment has hardly figured at all, and stories of discontinuity have typically been framed against the traditional narrative of stability and recurrence. With an eye to history, it has for instance been argued forcefully that the emergence of new technologies, new rationalities of government, and the second wave of imperialism imply that the 19th century should be seen as a break with what came before.³² More common has been a 'contemporary' focus, where various changes after the Second World War, and in particular after the Cold War, have been interpreted as signs of fundamental discontinuity. It was possibly the high hopes of an increasingly integrated world community that led scholars in IR to position questions of (dis)continuity within broadly liberal narratives of globalisation, normative progress, and space-time compressions, all framed in terms of relationality and entanglements.

With the unfolding disintegration and higher tensions among several blocks, those progressive narratives do not seem to capture our present predicament, although discontinuity abounds in

²²Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics', *International Organization*, 46:2 (1992), pp. 391–425.

²³Mlada Bukovansky, *Legitimacy and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Political Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁴Leo Gross, 'The Peace of Westphalia, 1648–1948', *The American Journal of International Law*, 42:1 (1948), pp. 20–41.

²⁵Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho, 'The function of myths in international relations: Discipline and identity', in Andreas Gofas, Innana Hamati-Ataya, and Nicholas Onuf (eds), *The Sage Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2018), pp. 222–35.

²⁶Kessler and Leira, 'Stories we live by', pp. 5–8.

²⁷Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

²⁸Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1962).

²⁹Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

³⁰Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³¹Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³²Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

new ways. Today, the possibility of disintegration and collapse seems much more likely than any of those liberal narratives could ever imagine. This also has theoretical repercussions: in social theory, relational thought has certainly advanced our understanding of contemporary politics. Yet, with an eye to the current discontinuities (the globalisation enthusiasm and liberal hopes of the early 2000s are gone at least), the possibility of discontinuity and radical change needs to be conceptually incorporated.³³

Our point here is not to add to the critique of the liberal moment of the 1990s, but to highlight that the two stories are always part of a specific point in time that anchors the general convictions and makes arguments more or less convincing. This implies also that the question about the future is – in the end – a historical one: how we answer it depends on the way history gets written and assembled. Recent discussions on the continuing absence of any adequate history of women in International Thought or the post-colonial critique have similarly shown that to contest the given and imagine a different future demands the retrieval of a forgotten past. If we want to imagine the future differently, reconceptualising the past would thus be an obvious place to start.

To address this set of continuity and discontinuity – and without disregarding other options – we propose here to focus on concepts in general and conceptual history in particular. Whereas for much IR theory, concepts are nothing but an invisible and unimportant layer through which we touch upon the ‘real’ empirical processes and questions, recent contributions have highlighted that concepts incorporate important theoretical questions in their own right. The essays in Berenskoetter’s edited volume,³⁴ for example, bring conceptual analysis as such to bear on key current concepts, but they focus on academic practical uses, rather than the uses of concepts more broadly – in academia but also in the broader, everyday practice of international politics. In the same vein, a number of authors have approached international relations through key concepts.³⁵ The essays in Ish-Shalom’s edited volume are on the other hand fine-grained empirical investigations of international political practice, focusing primarily on state-level and bilateral concept use,³⁶ with only Mitrani looking at the international level as such.³⁷ Outside of IR, over the last decades, there has been a growing interconnectedness between intellectual history and the history of international thought,³⁸ and semantic studies of international law have brought new insights into treaty language.³⁹ Within conceptual history, there is also a nascent interest in the international dimension of conceptual change, including questions of translation.⁴⁰ The topic has also very recently

³³Today’s social theory still prefers stories of continuity, where relations to be found in networks, communities of practice or hierarchies go on. How relations decouple, disintegrate, and break down is, however, in need of further explanation. We hasten to add that should not be read as a critique of the ongoing debate on relational thought in IR. This debate has helped us to leave the substantivist cage of the state as a person framework and still has much to offer. For an early and still instructive contribution in this regard, see Patrick T. Jackson and Daniel Nexon, ‘Relations before states: Substance, process, and the study of world politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 291–332.

³⁴Felix Berenskoetter (ed.), *Concepts in World Politics* (London: Sage, 2016).

³⁵E.g. Milja Kurki, ‘Causes of a divided discipline: Rethinking the concept of cause in International Relations theory’, *Review of International Studies*, 32:2 (2006), pp. 189–216; Vladimir Rauta, ‘“Proxy war”: A reconceptualisation’, *Civil Wars*, 23:1 (2021), pp. 1–24.

³⁶Piki Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021).

³⁷Mor Mitrani, ‘The conceptual virtues of the international community as an empty signifier’, in Piki Ish-Shalom (ed.), *Concepts at Work: On the Linguistic Infrastructure of World Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), pp. 185–202.

³⁸David Armitage, ‘The international turn in intellectual history’, in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (eds), *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 232–52.

³⁹Heinz Duchhardt, ‘Peace treaties from Westphalia to the revolutionary era’, in Randall Lesaffer (ed.), *Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 45–58.

⁴⁰Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and Javier Fernández-Sebastián, *Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017); Einar Wigen, *State of Translation: Turkey in Interlingual Relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Pasi Ihalainen and Antero Holmila, *Nationalism and Internationalism Intertwined: A European History of Concepts beyond the Nation State* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022).

been broached in the study of international relations.⁴¹ Taken together, these analyses of past and present conceptual developments suggest on the one hand that historical conceptual change needs to be taken seriously in International Relations, and on the other hand that there is currently a significant upheaval underway in our very understanding of the world. As suggested recently, the scope of the upheaval and the pace at which it happens could be indicative of a possible ongoing conceptual revolution,⁴² a point to which we will return below. Let us first outline the promise of concepts before we move on.

What this literature on concepts broadly shows is that the study of concepts is not the study of ideas (like the idea of democracy), but the study of historical processes that affect social formations with their own spatio-temporal fixes. A history of concepts is thus also a history of how it became possible (and acceptable) in a given (global) society to say and do this or that with effects on politics. Concepts can thus both be drivers and indicators of change. Unlike the traditional IR focus on states – regardless of the period at hand – interacting in systems through war and diplomacy, and where change happens predominantly on the level of material factors, this directs us towards the ‘logic’ and rules of the game. To focus on concepts thus allows us to recast the question of continuity and discontinuity.

If we return to the disjuncture common to IR, 1648 (or the mid-17th century) as a demarcation date for the unchanging nature of international relations has usually served to occlude conceptual change. At this time, it was assumed, the sovereign nation state and the state system came into being. However, analysts have traced changes in key concepts such as war, peace, and balance of power both before and after 1648.⁴³

From a conceptual point of view, we have to note that sovereignty was not mentioned at all in the treaties of Westphalia. The concept itself emerged first in the late 16th century and has changed considerably over time.⁴⁴ And, while a distinction between the inside and the outside of the state can clearly be seen to emerge during the 17th century, it is not as obviously clear if and how this distinction was tied to conceptual differentiation. There was for instance no corresponding change in the concept of ‘politics’; it had changed in important ways before the 17th century but would remain the same for internal and external activities well into the 18th century, before splintering and changing again.⁴⁵ In doing so, it influenced how it became necessary and possible to describe something as foreign policy,⁴⁶ but only well into the 18th century. Diplomacy for its part was only coined as an actual term at the time of the French Revolution.⁴⁷ Other concepts, such as friendship,⁴⁸ stopped almost entirely being used for relations between polities. Finally, the concept

⁴¹Zeynep Gulsah Capan, Filipe dos Reis, and Maj Grasten (eds), *The Politics of Translation in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁴²Helge Jordheim and Erling Sandmo, ‘Introduction: The world as concept and object of knowledge’, in Helge Jordheim and Erling Sandmo (eds), *Conceptualizing the World: An Exploration across Disciplines* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), pp. 1–26; Oliver Kessler, ‘Conceptual history in International Relations: From ideology to social theory?’, in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 551–61.

⁴³Jens Bartelson, *War in International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Istvan Kende, ‘The history of peace: Concept and organizations from the late Middle Ages to the 1870s’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 26:3 (1989), pp. 233–47; Morten Skumsrud Andersen, ‘A genealogy of the balance of Power’, PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science (2016).

⁴⁴Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁵Maurizio Viroli, ‘The revolution in the concept of politics’, *Political Theory*, 20:3 (1992), pp. 473–95; Kari Palonen, *The Struggle with Time: A Conceptual History of ‘Politics’ as an Activity* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2006).

⁴⁶Halvard Leira, ‘The emergence of foreign policy’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:1 (2019), pp. 187–98.

⁴⁷James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); Costas M. Constantinou, *On the Way to Diplomacy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Halvard Leira, ‘A conceptual history of diplomacy’, in Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr, and Paul Sharp (eds), *Sage Handbook of Diplomacy* (London: Sage, 2016), pp. 28–38.

⁴⁸Evgeny Roshchin, ‘The concept of friendship: From princes to states’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:4 (2006), pp. 599–624; Evgeny Roshchin, *Friendship among Nations: History of a Concept* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

of the international itself was famously only coined by Bentham as late as in 1780 and changed significantly over the ensuing century.⁴⁹ If we combine the well-established presence of a conceptual revolution in domestic political concepts between 1750 and 1850 with the growing appreciation of how ‘international’ concepts changed during the same period, it seems like a good bet that what we think of today as ‘international relations’ emerged during this specific period – that international relations became *conceptualised* during the 18th and 19th centuries.

There is certainly still much to explore about the differentiated conceptual changes. Yet with an eye to the question about the future, it becomes hard to assume that our future will hold our conceptual framework constant and hence that we already possess the conceptual apparatus that will become necessary to understand the future present, just as it is hard to imagine that earlier actors upheld similar ideas to ours about the future when the conceptual apparatus was not yet in place. In the end, it is hard to uphold an understanding of underlying conceptual continuity if the actors engaged in interactions invented new terms for their actions and interactions and repeatedly invested both old and new terms with new meaning. The assumption that the states and the state system have existed and worked in constant ways has appeared as more than dubious from a historical point of view for decades; and the idea that what goes on between and above states has been more or less the same over the last 450 years and is accessible through concepts which have been stable and with the same meaning for the same period of time (or even longer) and across territories and distinct linguistic communities is quite simply untenable.

To conclude, questions of discontinuity and continuity, of change and stability, of past and future, always link up to concepts. Concepts are indicative of the limits of the sayable and the visible. They thereby not only offer a way to trace ongoing disruptions but also allow us to trace the uncharted terrain of past futures: all those imaginations and ideas that were held in the past and never materialised. Yet so far, our discussion has focused on individual concepts such as the state. While much can be said about conceptual changes and their semantic fields, we want to now introduce the idea of systemic changes in the sense of a reconfiguration of the entire socio-political vocabulary. For that, we first introduce conceptual history as an approach, before we move towards questions of multiple temporalities and thus the historicity of the future.

From concepts to conceptual history: Saddle Time and multiple temporalities

Concepts offer a useful entrance to questions about change and hence already offer a specific avenue to how a future can be imagined. Now, to push the argument somewhat further, we have to realise that the future itself is a concept that has undergone significant conceptual transformations. It is a recent invention that the future is actually separate from the past and hence that time is thought of in linear terms.⁵⁰ The changing conceptual configuration of *fortuna* and *virtù* as well as discussions on eschatological understandings of time can serve here as helpful reminders here. Even if we were to buy into the Kantian idea of space and time as being things in themselves that escape the grasp of Reason, their conceptual manifestations do not and have changed over time. Ian Hacking, for example, has nicely shown how the conceptual innovations around probability, upon which much of our modern understanding of science is based, was made possible through a refined understanding of nature and the collapse of the dominance of the past in producing evidence.⁵¹ Likewise, it is only with a reconfiguration of the past, present, and future in the sense that future was now

⁴⁹Jani Marjanen and Ruben Ros, ‘International, from legal to civic discourse and beyond in the nineteenth century’, in Pasi Ihalainen and Antero Holmila (eds), *Nationalism and Internationalism Intertwined: A European History of Concepts beyond the Nation State* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022), pp. 60–85.

⁵⁰On questions of time and timing in IR more generally, see Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Andrew R. Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵¹Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

perceived to be unknown and open that the state as a concept was formed, as Foucault has shown.⁵² To understand the future as a concept thus allows for a contingency of the spatio-temporal order(s) in which concepts of the future operate.

To explore further the changing constellations of temporal layers in their historical manifestations, we propose here the approach of conceptual history as a useful avenue. Conceptual history is predominantly associated with the work of Reinhart Koselleck, which took shape in post-Second World War Germany.⁵³ Conceptual history was originally situated in-between historiography and hermeneutic phenomenology, through which many questions of Germany's specific history, its past, present, and future were renegotiated.⁵⁴ We do not want to engage in a too lengthy discussion of the origins of *Begriffsgeschichte* at this point⁵⁵ but simply highlight that conceptual history is more than simply the historical reconstruction of conceptual changes. It has the ambition to provide specific answers to ontological and epistemological questions that range from scientific inquiry and historiography to anthropology.⁵⁶ Here, we want to point to two aspects that are particularly helpful for any answer about the future: the concept of Saddle Time as systemic change; and the idea of multiple temporalities.

Saddle Time and systemic change

As conceptual analyses of different kinds have demonstrated, the basic concepts of political and social life have changed greatly over time, in interplay with different material changes, so that it makes sense to speak about 'systemic ruptures' or 'epistemes'. The idea that there are systemic change in the very way things are organised is of course not alien to International Relations. Michel Foucault identified such a break in the mid-18th century,⁵⁷ while English conceptual history of the kind associated in particular with Quentin Skinner pinpointed fundamental changes somewhat earlier.⁵⁸ From different perspectives, and with different time spans, scholars have drawn up in-depth conceptual histories of numerous domestic political concepts, including politics itself, as noted above. Collected works have discussed a wider range of concepts in somewhat less detail, most spectacularly in the eight-volume German *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* [*Basic Concepts in History*], published between 1972 and 1997.

In the preface to this collection, Reinhart Koselleck formulated the thesis of a 'Saddle Time', i.e. the transformations taking place during the Enlightenment and the revolutionary period. During this time between 1750 and 1850, 'a flood of previously unknown words and meanings has appeared, thus testifying to a new understanding of the world, which soon infused the entire language. Old expressions were enriched with new novel content. This ... also reframed all the terms used to discuss state and society, including these very concepts.'⁵⁹ What the period witnessed

⁵² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2008).

⁵³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1959).

⁵⁴ Hans Joas and Peter Vogt, *Begriffene Geschichte: Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks* (Suhrkamp, 2011); Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik: ein kritisches Kompendium* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).

⁵⁵ But see Kessler, 'Conceptual history'.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2007); Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

⁵⁸ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

⁵⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Introduction and prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany)', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 6:1 (2011), pp. 1–37 (p. 10). In this article, we follow a Koselleckian understanding of concepts: 'In use a word can become unambiguous. By contrast, a concept must remain ambiguous to be a concept. The concept is connected to a word, but is at the same time more than a word: a word becomes a concept only when the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context which and for which a word is used can be condensed into one word' (Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 85). See also discussion in

was a conceptual revolution.⁶⁰ In the Saddle Time, concepts carried a Janus face: looking into the past, concepts mirrored past experiences that they did not represent anymore. Even if the word stayed the same, its meaning had changed. Going backwards, these concepts were thus in need of translation and reconstruction. Looking forward to the future, they pointed to a future that was impossible to foresee: the future they imagined is not the future we inhabit today.

Moreover, a particularly important feature of this period was the reconceptualised notions of time. This included both a perceived acceleration of time itself and a shift from (often cyclical) histories in the plural to an understanding of history as unidirectional and unitary, the move from history as exemplary to history as unique event or universal relation, a ‘temporalization of history’⁶¹ which introduced new ways of perceiving agency and the idea of linear time. Underlying this was the overall idea of acceleration of time and of progress, that the future could and would be different from the past, rather than a variety of cyclical repetition. In Koselleck’s terms,⁶² the ‘horizon of expectation’ (what futures are possible to imagine) could in a much more significant way than before move beyond the narrow ‘space of experience’ (in a sense our repertoire of stories to draw on); tomorrow could be imagined as different from yesterday or today. Importantly, this change did not only concern the concepts of history and progress as such but also implied an incorporation of the idea of progress in other concepts. This approach to temporality also made it possible to study more systematically the earlier realised and unrealised visions of the future, what Koselleck referred to as ‘futures past’, futures imagined possible in the past, which still exist in the sense that they structured past decisions.

While the notion of a Saddle Time shares with other approaches the idea of a systemic change, it puts emphasis on the conceptual reconfigurations that occurred at that time that all also point towards a shift in the temporal order in the sense that the relation of the past and future itself had changed. As Koselleck highlights, the transformation from histories to history in the collective singular was made possible by a rupture between the past (experience) and future (expectation) that made that very relationship contingent. Concepts became more fluid and had to problematise the new temporal order. Koselleck traces this conflict via semantic struggles that characterised the Prussian Reforms,⁶³ where Hardenberg, for example, would address the aristocracy not in terms of their ‘status’ of inherited titles, but as a class, a concept that was used in economic-administrative terms and hence incorporated a different relation to the future. At that time, we also see the spread of terms such as tradition or generation, which all highlight that the past only selectively passes on traits to the present and hence that the relationship between the past and present has become contingent.

A logical corollary of the idea of a past conceptual revolution is the possibility of further revolutionary change, and based on the observed conceptual innovations of the last decades, one might currently find some indicators that we are witnessing some elements of a new ‘revolutionary’ change – revolutionary not in terms of the speed at which these transformations unfold, but in terms of the depth of the transformations underway. We see two indicators.⁶⁴ First, for example, the phenomenon of global warming, its space, and its consequences are certainly well established.

Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), chapter 4. This is not the only possible approach to concepts and conceptual change in international relations but is chosen here because it explicitly geared towards broad historical change and because of its established focus on conceptual transformations around 1800.

⁶⁰We are using ‘revolution’ primarily as a heuristic and to grasp fundamental change taking place within a relatively bounded period of world historical time. Conceptual revolutions are revolutions in the sense of the industrial revolution (spanning decades) rather than the French (spanning months and years) or the agricultural one (spanning millennia).

⁶¹Koselleck, *Futures Past*, chapter 2.

⁶²Koselleck, *Futures Past*, chapter 14; see also Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 111.

⁶³Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*.

⁶⁴These indicators are by no means meant as a substantive argument in terms of cause and effects. They are merely used as an invitation envision possible conceptual transformations.

It also has led to conceptual innovations that all attempt to offer new ways to think about this issue. We can think here of Latour's Gaja conferences, planetary (health) politics, and in particular the Anthropocene. They all point out that the idea of an unknown future that can be organised 'effectively' becomes increasingly problematic as we need to avoid a *known* future rather than an unknown one. If we follow Foucault's argument that the 'transformation' of the temporal order (from known to unknown) is linked with the emergence of the state, then it is interesting to note that these conceptual avenues, in their different ways, point out that our current way of allocating political authority is more part of the problem than part of the solution, a point that economists have also started to point out.⁶⁵ A second indicator can be found in the literature on digital technologies, where today it has become natural to speak about 'machine learning': machines share data and experiences and thereby continuously 'improve' their data base and performance without interference by human beings. We certainly do not want to question the technological side of things but simply point out that here significant conceptual issues are at stake that also redefine questions of accountability and responsibility. Assume a machine learns the wrong thing and somebody dies. Who can be held responsible? The possible answers range from the algorithm, the one who programmed it, to the neural network. That we have to rethink 'agency', 'intention', accountability and other key terms of our socio-political vocabulary away from subjects highlights the significant conceptual changes under way. And we have not even started to talk about cryptos and the question of whether these are assets, as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission seems to claim, or 'ecologies' and 'networks'.

On one hand, conceptual innovations and reworkings such as these could be seen as part and parcel of the evolution of social and political life, with concepts sometimes acting as drivers of change ('sustainable development' would seem to be one example of this), at other times serving more as indicators of change (as in the case of 'machine learning'). Ongoing conceptual changes such as these bring uncertainty to our speculations about the future, but that uncertainty is bounded within an overall familiar way of thinking about past, present and future; the space of experience leads relatively seamlessly to a horizon of expectation. On the other hand – and this can only be suggested and not proven within the length of one article, if indeed provable in any meaningful sense at all – the sum total of conceptual change, particularly to the extent that changes involve reconfigurations of how time is perceived, might suggest that we are at the onset of another Saddle Time, when expectations and experience (or the lack thereof) are increasingly determined by technological innovations, big data applications, and artificial intelligence neural networks. If we are indeed at the outset of or in the early stages of a second conceptual revolution, and this is speculation, to think about the future will necessarily be a lot more tenuous.⁶⁶ A basic reorientation of our perception of time might make the concepts of the near past virtually meaningless in the not-too-distant future; the space of experience might not provide us with a useful horizon of expectations. We hasten to add that we raise the question of a possible new Saddle Time primarily as a way of challenging the imagination.⁶⁷ It is exceedingly hard to diagnose revolutionary change while it takes place. The owl of Minerva famously flies only at dusk, and even more so when the 'revolution' in question might span decades or even a century and could conceivably alter our very perception of time itself.⁶⁸ But suggesting that revolutionary conceptual change might be underway

⁶⁵Bank of International Settlement, *The Green Swan Report* (Basle: BIS, 2020).

⁶⁶That the above-mentioned Green Swan report speaks about a needed epistemological shift from past-oriented (statistics) to future-oriented risk models (like scenarios) might serve here as a case in point.

⁶⁷Saddle Time for us indicates an epistemological shift that de-stabilises established meanings and semantic fields. To argue for the possibility of a second Saddle Time slowly unfolding thus seeks to highlight the potential for transformative conceptual challenges and discontinuities. We do not want to argue that a possible Saddle Time 2.0 would unfold in the same way as the Saddle Time of the 19th century.

⁶⁸As emphasised above, this discussion is intended as a provocation that treats concepts as indicators of change. It is not intended as an empirical statement – though we do believe that we are currently witnessing potentially transformative changes. There is no neutral way of deciding what qualifies as a revolution, even retroactively, but in principle both qualitative and quantitative measures can suggest answers. Qualitatively, one could make the argument that a conceptual revolution in international

should serve as a useful corrective to banal prognostication and projections of the future as simply varieties of the past. If the diagnosis of revolutionary change is at least partially right, we can expect further transformations of key concepts that range from responsibility to authority, from accountability to agency, that also will determine our future in important ways. However, when approaching the question of whether we are moving towards a new revolution – and hence a new temporal order – a second ‘pillar’ in conceptual history provides further tools for thinking.

Multiple temporalities

The link between space of experience and horizons of expectations is crucial to any attempt at thinking about the future. Although typically not expressed in exactly those terms, it lies at the heart of different forms of prediction, including the futurology and scenario-thinking which has operated in the margins of the IR discipline.⁶⁹ At a very basic level, the challenge to IR here is that a narrow space of experience necessarily leads to restricted horizons of expectation. On one hand, if our space of experience consists of ‘Western’ history and state-like units interacting in some form of anarchical way, and progress is at most incremental, our horizon of expectations easily collapses into the future being ‘more of the same’, a ‘Clash of Civilisations’ or a ‘Thucydides trap’.⁷⁰ On the other hand, if the belief in progress is fully internalised, the idea of a future unfolding directly in the present could also collapse the horizon of expectations into a future already realised in the present, ‘more of the same’, in ‘The end of history’.⁷¹

To Koselleck, though, both of these alternatives would be simplistic variations of a theme of unitary time. To him, exploration of the present in terms of spaces of experience and horizons of expectations led to the conclusion that ‘it is only meaningful to speak of historical times in the plural’,⁷² or indeed to consider different ‘sediments of time’.⁷³ One way of approaching this would be to distinguish different sediments according to their relative ratios of historical ‘repetition and singularity’.⁷⁴ This is somewhat in line with a Braudelian distinction between short-, medium-, and long-term change, but Koselleck also explicitly added varieties of speed: ‘To propose the existence of different sediments of time makes it possible to grasp different speeds of change and transformation.’⁷⁵ In the words of Helge Jordheim: ‘Koselleck developed his theory of multiple temporalities, organized in the form of temporal layers that have different origins and duration and move at different speeds, as an alternative to the linear and empty time of periodization. ... Periods, discontinuities, and structures of chronological succession form part of this theory, but so

relations has taken place when the concepts utilised to make sense of the international would be incomprehensible to earlier generations. To give a brief example, the idea of ‘diplomacy’ as a separate sphere and ‘diplomats’ conducting negotiations at the ‘international’ level was commonplace at least by 1840, but it would have made little sense only 50 years before. Quantitatively, one could focus on key historical discontinuities and utilise time series data to show the emergence, rise, and fall of key concepts. Tools from natural language processing, e.g. word embedding regressions, can demonstrate how meanings have changed over time and in response to key developments, while synthetic control methods and interrupted time-series designs make it possible to construct counterfactuals of what concept usage would have looked like absent a conceptual revolution. For our part, we would stress the qualitative change: the notion of a conceptual revolution points to a transformation, not a summation.

⁶⁹Jenny Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post Cold War Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Iver B. Neumann and Erik F. Øverland, ‘International relations and policy planning: The method of perspectivist scenario building’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 5:3 (2004), pp. 258–77.

⁷⁰Merely opening up the space of experience geographically can thus lead to significantly different horizons of expectation. In the realm of analogical reasoning, see Akos Kopper and Tamas Peragovics, ‘Overcoming the poverty of Western historical imagination: Alternative analogies for making sense of the South China Sea conflict’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 360–82, which demonstrates this for the South China Sea.

⁷¹Cf. Andersson, *The Future of the World*, p. 16. Andersson notes how such thinking about the end of the future (as found in Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*) could draw on a ‘Koselleckian’ understanding of the past. She argues, though, and we agree, that such a reading constitutes only one possible understanding of Koselleck.

⁷²Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. 114.

⁷³Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), chapter 1.

⁷⁴Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, p. 161.

⁷⁵Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, p. 9.

do nonsynchronicities, structures of repetition, sudden events, and slow, long-term changes.⁷⁶ This approach to history and time spans beyond conceptual history but was nevertheless grounded in an understanding of conceptual change, how concepts embody both continuity and change, and how concepts enable and disable futures. Although Koselleck's thought was decidedly grounded in the European (one might even say, the German) experience, the notion of multiple temporalities should resonate well beyond that experience. For instance, it connects fairly easily to the ideas of different coexisting cosmologies with different understandings of time, as articulated in the idea of pluriversality,⁷⁷ and also in the notion of the European experience being based on historically changing cosmologies.⁷⁸

The idea of multiple temporalities has several important implications for how we approach change in international relations and its concepts. It immediately raises the question of the relative ratio of repetition and singularity in the international. A traditional reading would be that the international has stronger features of repetition than domestic contexts. Alternatively, it could well be argued that the existence of 'the international' is so new (and itself a product of the transition to modernity which created the historicity of history), that one should perhaps expect more singularity and more rapid change. Such a reading would cast the Western statesmen and IR theorists of the last two centuries as desperate stabilisers, attempting to force some semblance of repetition and conceptual stability on a world with high singularity and in conceptual flux. In the last instance, we would argue that the relative balance between repetition and singularity remains an empirical question.

The flip side of multiple temporalities coexisting at the same time is that it will tend to lead to such attempts at stabilisation, or what Jordheim and Wigen refer to as 'conceptual synchronisation'.⁷⁹ A lot of power has been spent on 'making these multiple temporalities appear to be synchronised, or even uniform and universal,'⁸⁰ enforcing conceptual homogeneity in spite of global variation. These attempts at creating universality are in many ways what accounts of pluriversality have diagnosed and criticised over the last decades. In Jordheim and Wigen's perceptive account, the overall synchronising concept of modernity was 'progress', while they suggest more tentatively (in an analysis which has only increased in salience after the Covid pandemic) that 'crisis' is now doing a lot of the work of synchronisation. From the perspective of IR, this emphasis on progress would reinforce the tension in the discipline between its roots as an anti-modern approach, doubting the very possibility of progress,⁸¹ and competing notions of perfectibility. Logically, however, one should also be able to observe attempts at synchronisation more locally, not necessarily at the level of overall master-concepts. The enforced global spread and uptake of the concepts of international relations first developed in Europe around 1800, to the detriment of localised concepts working at different speeds and at different levels, could be one illustration of such attempted (and largely successful) synchronisation, in a process of 'funneling',

⁷⁶ Helge Jordheim, 'Against periodization: Koselleck's theory of multiple temporalities,' *History and Theory*, 51:2 (2012), pp. 170–1. It should be noted that the idea of multiple temporalities concerns itself with the passage and speed of time, not with perceptions of time. It is thus not the same as 'heterotemporality', although there is a family resemblance. See for a short IR discussion Andy Hom, 'Silent order: The temporal turn in critical International Relations,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 303–30.

⁷⁷ This idea, articulated most explicitly in the work of Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, has found a ready reception in IR in recent years; of particular relevance to our argument here, see e.g. Tamara Trowsell, Navnita Chadha Behera, and Giorgio Shani, 'Introduction to the special issue: Pluriversal relationality,' *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 787–800; Amaya Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis: Relational methods for a pluriversal IR,' *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 875–90; Ajay Parasram, 'Pluriversal sovereignty and the state of IR,' *Review of International Studies*, 49:3 (2023), pp. 356–67. We thank one of our perceptive reviewers for helping us making the connection between Koselleck and pluriversality.

⁷⁸ Bentley B. Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷⁹ Helge Jordheim and Einar Wigen, 'Conceptual synchronisation: From progress to crisis,' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 421–39.

⁸⁰ Jordheim and Wigen, 'Conceptual synchronisation', p. 426.

⁸¹ Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

as referred to by Stenius.⁸² One could thus read IR's long insistence on the anarchy-presumption as a localised attempt at conceptual stabilisation around conflict and its prevention, nested within (and in explicit opposition to) the overall progress orientation of modernity. Nothing illustrates the power of conceptual synchronisation better than how theories contesting the realist narrative again and again have reiterated the centrality of anarchy, even if challenging its features and implications. Here, one nevertheless must take into account that translation, even between fairly closely related languages, introduces slight differences in meaning; synchronisation will probably always be only partial. The observation that anarchy is what states make of it might thus be even more precise, also conceptually, than originally envisioned.

Beyond change as such, the notions of multiple temporalities and synchronisation have important consequences for our capacity to prognosticate. Prognoses and predictions based solely on one layer and one historical tempo are particularly prone to present partial or even wrong-headed horizons of the future. This ties in with the question of whether different parts and concepts of the international operate at different levels of sedimentation. Superficially, it would seem to us that concepts of inter-polity relations might be more durable than economic or technological ones. However, what counts as a truism in conceptual history, but is often ignored in IR, is what we noted in the introduction: that stability in terms often masks substantial change in conceptual content. The persistence of concepts such as 'state', 'sovereignty', 'balance of power', or 'diplomacy' might allow International Relations to rest assured in their permanence, but this permanence belies the significant conceptual change which has taken place while the words have remained. This obviously has implications for prognostication. Take for instance 'diplomacy'. From its emergence during the French Revolution to the First World War, 'diplomacy' was primarily a derogatory term, used by liberal critics to denounce the secret dealings of kings and aristocrats, and widely seen as likely cause of war. Over the ensuing century, 'diplomacy' has been gradually reconceptualised as the antithesis of war, no longer solely the domain of states, and increasingly appropriated for positive purposes.^{83,84} Based on 230 years of conceptual history, one would thus probably be safe in prognosticating that scholars will be discussing 'diplomacy' 50 years into the future. However, the same conceptual history would also suggest that one should not expect the conceptual content of 'diplomacy' to be the same as it is today.

The past and present tensions between multiple temporalities and attempts at temporal synchronisation also suggest a potential for future conflicts. It is not hard to envision a future where there is conflict between attempts to see time as unitary in one specific way and resistance against this vision, both geographically centred and coming from other temporal layers. Geographically, concepts such as 'Asian values' could be seen as a protest against the unitary vision of progress. Based on different temporal layers and speeds, one could also interpret the tension between 'sovereignty' and 'Responsibility to Protect' as a resistance against temporal synchronisation. At a theoretical level, the idea of pluriversality, mentioned above, entails an explicit rejection of synchronisation into a universal conceptual framework.

At a more overarching level, the tension between multiple temporalities and conceptual synchronisation returns us to the question of whether the future should be seen as in principle open versus in principle closed, whether change beyond existing systems and structures is even thinkable or whether we are stuck in some loop of recurrence. Where the optimism of the early post-Cold War rested on a staunch belief in progress, a lot of the crisis talk of the last decades rests on a

⁸²Henrik Stenius, 'Concepts in a Nordic periphery', in Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden, and J. Fernández-Sebastián (eds), *Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), pp. 263–80.

⁸³Halvard Leira, 'New diplomacy', in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Diplomacy* (West Sussex: Wiley, 2018), pp. 1347–54.

⁸⁴Halvard Leira, 'Old diplomacy', in Gordon Martel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Diplomacy*, vol. 3 (West Sussex: Wiley, 2018), pp. 1389–96.

notion of a closed future. Imagining an Anthropocene environmental collapse is structurally not that different from the imagining of nuclear apocalypse of the Cold War.⁸⁵

Beyond even the question of an open versus a closed future, we believe that a conceptual synchronisation based on crisis, taken together with the rapid conceptual changes we are currently seeing, might suggest more transformative changes. As we discussed above, the idea of a conceptual revolution around 1800 rested not only on individual concepts changing, but on a fundamental reconfiguration of the perception of space and time. While revolutions are typically only assessed after the fact, we think it is at least worth considering whether we are witnessing the start of a similar reconfiguration in our own time. Might the conceptual frameworks relating to evolving forms of authority, climate change, technological breakthroughs, et cetera lead to completely new ways of thinking about past, present, and future? It is exceedingly hard to predict what such new ways of thinking might look like: much as the concepts of 1775 were of little use to grasp the world of 1825, the concepts of 2000 might give us few pointers about how we will conceptualise the world in 2050. Acknowledging the possibility of new conceptual configurations nevertheless by necessity implies acknowledging that a different future is possible. Different both from our current present and also from the current ways of even thinking about the future.

Conclusion

This contribution argued that the future is just another past. This historicity of the future encompasses three levels: the level of conceptual change which makes a certain future thinkable; the past futures; and the spatio-temporal order. As for the first level, it showed that the question about the future is linked to conceptualisations of change and the question of continuities and discontinuities. How we imagine the future thus depends on the conceptual apparatus at hand and hence the limits of what is visible and sayable. This includes, however, the future itself: the future itself is a concept and as such has a specific history. To acknowledge this conceptuality of the future opens the way to analysing the futures forgone that never materialised but that still exist and eventually structured the options that are now available. Thus in a quite genealogical sense, past futures can be recast in options and alternatives forgone that still structured past decisions and options. Without a sound understanding of those past futures, we miss more than half of the available history. In particular, we run the risk of a double survivorship bias. The first element of that is straightforward enough, in that we tend to prioritise observed outcomes, with alternative outcomes serving as empirical counterfactuals. The second element is what we are after here, namely that we typically remain confined to our own understanding of time and our place in it, ignoring the conceptual counterfactual or indeed the conceptually unimaginable, of what if differently imagined past futures had been realised. Why did those futures never come to be, and yet, how do they help structure our current present and future?

The concept of the future encompasses another dimension though: the future has a specific conceptual history in the sense that the concept itself underwent transformations and ruptures. The future we know today is part of a linear concept of time that historically emerged around the 18th century. The relationship between the past, present, and future itself is subject to change: the past, present, and future show – historically – contingent entanglements: temporal and spatial orders are equally subject to questions of continuity and discontinuity, as recent contributions to the temporally and spatially produced hierarchies have shown.

To trace this dimension, this contribution drew from conceptual history in the Koselleckian sense that Saddle Time and multiple temporalities offer productive ways to conceptualise the future. The classic distinction of change in and change of the system was translated into the idea

⁸⁵ A different form of protest against the idea of progress has been articulated in the queer theory notion of ‘no future’, associated in particular with Lee Edelman, where ‘reproductive futurism’ is denounced. This can be considered a complete rejection of the idea of any future, but it should be noted that it has come under feminist criticism for silencing non-procreational reproduction: Anca Parvulescu, ‘Reproduction and queer theory: Between Lee Edelman’s no future and J. M. Coetzee’s slow man’, *PMLA*, 132:1 (2017), pp. 86–100.

of conceptual change versus Saddle Time, i.e. a conceptual revolution of the entire socio-political vocabulary which also allowed us to explore the idea of multiple temporalities and conceptual synchronisation.

This leaves us with four implications for International Relations scholarship and for further research: on the first level, the discussion on concepts makes it possible to trace how concepts allow for the formation of social forms, and as such it is possible to reconstruct how certain futures are inscribed in concepts. The advancement in the Anthropocene or Gaia are perfect illustrations of how changes in specific concepts allow for a reimagination of the future. Second, via conceptual history it is possible to open the gateway to the past futures that never were. Third, further evidence is needed for understanding the historical Saddle Time. Conceptual historians have collected a variety of sources and evidence that point towards an historical conceptual revolution. The international dimension of those conceptual changes, however, remain somewhat underdeveloped. Fourth and finally, the question of whether we are on the threshold of a new conceptual revolution deserves more sustained attention.

In sum, conceptual history offers International Relations tools for understanding both our past and our present better, while also pointing to the necessity and limitations of understanding the future as just another past.

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