

## What's the Big Idea?

### Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Historians of all kinds are beginning to return to temporally expansive studies after decades of aversion and neglect. There are even signs that intellectual historians are returning to the *longue durée*. What are the reasons for this revival of long-range intellectual history? And how might it be rendered methodologically robust as well as historically compelling? This article proposes a model of *transtemporal history*, proceeding via *serial contextualism* to create a *history in ideas* spanning centuries, even millennia: key examples come from work in progress on ideas of civil war from ancient Rome to the present. The article concludes with brief reflections on the potential impact of the digital humanities on the practice of intellectual history.

**Keywords:** Cambridge School; civil war; conceptual history; digital humanities; *longue durée*.

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<sup>†</sup> Forthcoming, *History of European Ideas*, 38, 3 (September 2012). This article is a revised version of the Annual Nicolai Rubinstein Lecture in the History of Political Thought and Intellectual History given at Queen Mary, University of London, on 29 March 2012. For their comments and encouragement, I am especially grateful to Richard Bourke, Jo Guldi, Jim Kloppenberg, Darrin McMahon, Sophie Rosenfeld and Quentin Skinner.

In many realms of historical writing, big is back. In some areas—historical archaeology, comparative sociology or world-systems theory—it never went away. In others, it clearly has disappeared, never to return: the globe-spanning universal histories associated with Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee seem unlikely to be imitated again, at least as lifelong, multi-volume projects by single authors driven by a comprehensive vision of civilisation.<sup>1</sup> Across the historical profession, the telescope rather than the microscope is increasingly the preferred instrument of examination; the long-shot not the close-up is becoming an ever-more prevalent picture of the past. A tight focus has hardly been abandoned, as the continuing popularity of biography and the utility of microhistory both amply show. However, it is being supplemented by broad panoramas of both space and time displayed under various names: “world history”, “deep history” and “big history”. This return to the *longue durée* presents challenges and opportunities for all historians:<sup>2</sup> here I want to consider its implications for the practice of intellectual history.

At its most ambitious, big history—so-called by its practitioners, who have now founded an [International Big History Association](#)—stretches back to the Big Bang itself.<sup>3</sup> This is a universal history that is coterminous with the universe itself, drawing on the findings of cosmology, astronomy, geology and evolutionary biology as well as more

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<sup>1</sup> David Christian, “The Return of Universal History”, *History and Theory* 49 (2010), pp. 6-27.

<sup>2</sup> For broader reflections on the implications of this movement see Ignacio Obarri, “‘New’ New History: A *Longue Durée* Structure”, *History and Theory* 34 (1995), pp. 1–29; Barbara Weinstein, “History Without a Cause? Grand Narratives, World History, and the Postcolonial Dilemma”, *International Review of Social History* 50 (2005), pp. 71–93; David Armitage and Jo Guldi, “The Return of the *Longue Durée*” (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*, new edn. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

conventionally historical disciplines like archaeology and historical sociology. By contrast, “deep” history is relatively parochial, in that it delves only into the *human* past. It is self-defined as “deep” largely because it breaches the barrier between “pre-history” and history in the conventional sense of recorded history, the past as recoverable through the various signifying texts consciously constructed by agents who bequeathed them to the future.<sup>4</sup> Such deep history relies on genetics, neurophysiology and evolutionary biology, among other fields. Like the even bigger big history, it sees the conscious history of humans as both relatively brief and continuous with developments that long preceded the human ability to historicise themselves. By contrast, the comparatively unambitious “world” historians have usually confined themselves to a still narrower band of time, to thousands rather than tens of thousands or even billions of years, and to the Anthropocene in which humans shaped their environment and were shaped by it.<sup>5</sup>

Big history, in all its guises has been inhospitable to the questions of meaning and intention so central to intellectual history. This is not simply for the banal reason that the big historians usually scrutinise such a superficial slice of recorded history at the end of their grand sweeps: as Mark Twain deflatingly noted, “If the Eiffel Tower were now representing the world’s age, the skin of paint on the pinnacle-knob at its summit would represent man’s share of that age.”<sup>6</sup> Nor is it just because human agency dwindles in

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: A Guide for Researchers and Teachers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Patrick Manning, ed., *World History: Global and Local Interactions* (Princeton, NJ: M. Wiener, 2006); Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change”, *New Literary History* 43 (2012), pp. 1–18.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Twain, “The Damned Human Race” (1903), quoted in Christian, *Maps of Time*, p. 5.

significance in the face of cosmological or even archaeological time. It is due, for the moment at least, to the essential materialism of the two main strains of big history, what we might call the biologicistic and the economistic tendencies.

The biologicistic tendency is neurophysiologically reductive: when all human actions, including thought and culture, can be explained by brain chemistry, reflections approximate to reflexes.<sup>7</sup> In the economistic strain, intellect is assimilated to interest as each age simply “gets the thought that it needs”. For instance, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in the Axial Age are all the same in the end: simply the product of the problem-solving capacity of some rather clever but needy chimps.<sup>8</sup> In these regards, at least when it treats the questions of most concern to intellectual historians, deep history can appear to be somewhat shallow.

The original historians of the *longue durée*, the French Annalists, were not much more sympathetic to the concerns of intellectual history. There was the occasional distinguished counter-example, like Lucien Febvre, whose *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1942) treated the unthinkable rather than what had been thought, but even Febvre was highly critical of the history of philosophy produced by Ernst Cassirer, Raymond Klibansky and others: “concepts produced, one might imagine, by disembodied intellects living a totally unreal life in the realm of pure ideas.”<sup>9</sup> In his classic essay on

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<sup>7</sup> Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*; for an example of intellectual history in this manner, see Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2007), pp. 32-34 and *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (London: Profile Books, 2010), pp. 420, 476, 568, 621.

<sup>9</sup> Lucien Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, la religion de Rabelais* (Paris: A. Michel, 1942); “... concepts issus, pourrait-on croire, d'intelligences désincarnées et vivant, d'une vie toute irréelle, dans la sphère des idées pures”: Lucien Febvre, “Puissance et déclin d'une croyance”, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 9 (1937), p. 89.

the *longue durée*, Fernand Braudel did express admiration for masterworks by such cultural and literary historians as Ernst Robert Curtius and Febvre himself, but he saw their *chefs-d'oeuvre* as in effect mythographies, studies of unmoving and even immovable continuities, in which “mental frameworks were also prisons of the *longue durée*”.<sup>10</sup> Intellectual history would have to be subsumed into a history of *mentalités* that were by definition collective—treating the habits of an individual “in common with other men [*sic*] of his time”—and diachronic, therefore “more or less immobile”.<sup>11</sup>

Braudel’s examples of these enduring elements of the collective, unmoving *outillage mentale* included the idea of the crusade, the practice of geometrical pictorial space and an “Aristotelian concept of the universe” that was not dethroned until the Scientific Revolution. According to Braudel, these were subject to the same imperative of “permanence and survival” that characterised the lives of transhumant shepherds, trapped by the rhythmic cycles of their flocks, or of city-sites fixed by their topographies and geographies. He found them to be similarly independent of the ruptures and inversions taking place at the level of *histoire événementielle*. The *longue durée* as defined by the *Annales* historians was therefore infertile territory for intellectual historians. As Franco Venturi noted of their approach, “The whole ‘geological’ structure of the past is examined, but not the soil in which ideas themselves germinate and grow.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “... les cadres mentaux, aussi, sont prisons de longue durée”: Fernand Braudel, “Histoire et Sciences sociales. La longue durée”, *Annales E.S.C.* 13 (1958), pp. 731, 732.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Chartier, “Intellectual History or Sociocultural History? The French Trajectories”, in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 22 (quoting Jacques Le Goff), 25.

<sup>12</sup> Braudel, “La longue durée”, p. 732; Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 14.

Even as the historians of the *longue durée* were rejecting intellectual history, intellectual historians were inoculating themselves against the *longue durée*. In his classic 1969 article, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, Quentin Skinner criticised Arthur Lovejoy’s history of ideas and other long-range intellectual-historical projects (such as the teaching of Great Books in political theory) for reifying ideas into entities with life-stories but no substance, for ignoring agency and denying intention and, most devastatingly, for conjuring up “a history not of ideas at all, but abstractions: a history of thoughts which no one ever actually succeeded in thinking, at a level of coherence which no one ever actually attained.” Such a misbegotten methodology stood accused of giving aid and comfort to those—particularly political scientists—who abstracted arguments from their contexts to recover a timeless wisdom: timeless because untethered to specific moments of strategic deployment, and timeless in the sense that they endured across great swathes of time, often from (Western) antiquity to the present. Skinner concluded that “such histories can sometimes go wrong, but that they can never go right.” His proposed solution to this syllabus of errors was ever tighter rhetorical and temporal contextualisation by conceiving of ideas as arguments and of arguments as moves within language-games.<sup>13</sup>

Intellectual historians, at least in the English-speaking world, would focus henceforth on the synchronic and the short-term, not the diachronic and the long-range. Its stress on individual actors and their intentions was also at a far remove from the aggregative and anonymising procedures of a serial *histoire des mentalités*. Its defining attention to speech-acts, conceived within the broadly analytical philosophical tradition

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<sup>13</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory* 8 (1969), pp. 18, 35.

of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, long stifled any interchange with the more temporally expansive school of *Begriffsgeschichte*, with its fundamentally Heideggerian articulation of the continuities between past, present and future.<sup>14</sup> The separation between intellectual history and the *longue durée* therefore seemed both complete and irreversible as the historians of the *longue durée* foreswore intellectual history and intellectual history itself would henceforth be practiced in opposition to the *longue durée*.

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Because of this mutual repulsion, *longue-durée* intellectual history remained until recently an oxymoron, approximating to an impossibility, enclosing a profound moral error. But the first law of academic dynamics is that for every action there is a reaction: babies get thrown out with the bathwater, but they have an uncanny way of finding their feet again. In the past few years, intellectual histories of increasingly *longue durées* have begun to appear again. I am thinking here of works in very different registers, from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989), which lightly deploys history in the service of a just-so story, via Martin Jay's *Songs of Experience* (2005), Jerrold Seigel's *The Idea of the Self* (2005), Darrin McMahon's *Happiness: A History* (2006), Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's *Objectivity* (2007) and Peter Garnsey's *Thinking About Property*

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<sup>14</sup> Though for more recent *rapprochements* between the "Cambridge School" and conceptual history see especially Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter, eds., *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1996); Quentin Skinner, "Rhetoric and Conceptual Change", *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* 2 (1998), pp. 60-73.

(2007),<sup>15</sup> to a group of more recent and imminently forthcoming works: for example, Sophia Rosenfeld's *Common Sense: A Political History* (2011), Rainer Forst's *Toleration in Conflict* (2012), James Kloppenberg's *Tragic Irony: Democracy in European and American Thought*, Andrew Fitzmaurice's *Occupation: A Global History*, Richard Bourke's *Democracy: Representing Equality in History* and McMahon's *Genius: A History*, as well as my own work on conceptions of civil war, to which I will return shortly.<sup>16</sup>

What links these works is their ambition to construct diachronic histories focused on what my title has rather vulgarly called "big ideas": that is, central concepts in our political, ethical and scientific vocabularies that have deep pasts and in most cases have also been decisively transvalued at some point in the last three hundred years. The tendency marked by all these books has been labelled by Darrin McMahon "The Return of the History of Ideas?", with an all-important question mark.<sup>17</sup> This is conceivably a

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<sup>15</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006); Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); Peter Garnsey, *Thinking about Property: From Antiquity to the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011); Rainer Forst, *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); James T. Kloppenberg, *Tragic Irony: Democracy in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Occupation: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Richard Bourke, *Democracy: Representing Equality in History* (London: Profile Books, forthcoming); Darrin M. McMahon, *Genius: A History* (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> Darrin M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?", in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).



“return” because it resembles nothing so much as the old-fangled “history of ideas” associated with Lovejoy and his acolytes: diachronic, temporally ambitious, interdisciplinary (at least to the degree that it deals with different genres of intellectual production) and focused on leading concepts in mostly Euro-American history.

Put as broadly as this, the parallels might be sound, but closer scrutiny reveals defining differences. No intellectual historian would now use Lovejoy’s creaking metaphors of “unit-ideas” as chemical elements, nor would they assume that the biography of an idea could be written as if it had a quasi-biological continuity and identity through time, along with a life-cycle longer than that of any mortal human subject. There might be a family resemblance between the original history of ideas and its revenant namesake, but the kinship is artificial, not least because this new history of ideas has emerged in response to the profound critiques of Lovejoy’s methods that emerged after his death in 1962. Indeed, this may not be so much a return as the reinvention of long-range intellectual history to become something quite different: a method that is robust, that can appeal to a broad academic and even non-academic readership, and that can bring intellectual history back into conversation with other forms of “big” history. Out of this reinvention, I believe, we can effect a greatly overdue rapprochement between intellectual history and the *longue durée*.

To justify that rapprochement, let me offer three means which I hope will instantiate and illuminate this new breed of long-range intellectual history. The first is that we think of it as *transtemporal history*, on the analogy of transnational history. The second is that it should proceed by a method of *serial contextualism* by deploying the distinctive procedures of Anglo-American intellectual history, but by doing so

diachronically as well as synchronically. And the third is a proposal to conceive the result of this transtemporal serial contextualism as a *history in ideas* to distinguish it from the distrusted and discredited “history of ideas” associated with Lovejoy and his acolytes. What I want to do now is to explain each of these terms briefly and then to illustrate how I have been trying to put them into practice in writing a history of conceptions of civil war from Ancient Rome to the twenty-first century.

I have appropriated the term *transtemporal history* on the model of transnational history to stress elements of linkage and comparison across time, much as transnational history deals with such connections across space. (Unlike “transnational”, a term first found in the humanistic context of mid-nineteenth-century philology, “transtemporal” was originally a term of art in anatomy meaning “[c]rossing the temples; traversing the temporal lobe of the brain”: perhaps a not wholly inapt borrowing to describe a mode of intellectual history.)<sup>18</sup> Transnational history is both expansive and controlled: expansive, because it deliberately aims to transcend the histories of bounded nations or states, yet controlled in that it generally treats processes, conjunctures and institutions that crossed the borders of those historical units.<sup>19</sup>

Transnational history does not deny the existence of the national even its effort to go above and beyond the determinants of national space. Likewise, I submit,

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Transnational”, in Akira Iriye and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1047-55; *OED*, s.v., “transtemporal”.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Clavin, “Defining Transnationalism”, *Contemporary European History* 14 (2005), pp. 421-39; C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, “AHR Conversation: On Transnational History”, *American Historical Review* 111 (2006), pp. 1441-64; David Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History”, in McMahon and Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*; Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

transtemporal history should be extensive but similarly delimited: it links discrete contexts, moments and periods while maintaining the synchronic specificity of those contexts. Transtemporal history is not transhistorical: it is time-*bound* not timeless, to avoid the dangers of reification and denial of agency inherent in Lovejoy's abstract, atemporal history of ideas, for example. It also stresses the mechanisms of connection between moments and is therefore concerned with questions of concrete transmission, tradition and reception, again unlike the traditional history of ideas which assumed but did not investigate how ideas travelled materially and institutionally across time.

This transtemporal history will necessarily proceed by means of *serial contextualism*. By this I mean the reconstruction of a sequence of distinct contexts in which identifiable agents strategically deployed existing languages to effect definable goals such as legitimation and deligitimation, persuasion and dissuasion, consensus-building and radical innovation, for instance. At least since the contextualist revolution initiated by Skinner in 1969, most self-confessed contextualist intellectual historians have construed context synchronically and punctually: that is, as defined with a narrow chronologically and implicitly discontinuous with other contexts. One original purpose behind interpreting context so stringently was to discourage recourse to the *longue-durée* history of ideas *à la Lovejoy* that ignored context and downplayed the agency of language-users. This salutary exercise may however have had the unintended consequence that intellectual historians sealed off similar contexts that occurred earlier or

later in time from one another to create what one critic of contextualism has imagined as “history’s mail-train hauling self-synchronized periods in series like boxcars”.<sup>20</sup>

There is no good reason why we cannot overcome that objection by building corridors between the cars, as it were: that is, ways of joining diachronically reconstructed contexts across time—transtemporally—to produce longer-range histories which are neither artificially punctuated nor deceptively continuous. There are models for this, even from the heart of contextualist enterprise known as the “Cambridge School”. Is not John Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* (1975) in effect a work of serial contextualism? Or Richard Tuck’s *Rights of War and Peace* (1999)? Or even Quentin Skinner’s “Genealogy of the Modern State” (2009)?<sup>21</sup> I now even wonder if serial contextualism was not the method behind my own *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000): perhaps, like some intellectual-historical M. Jourdain, I can now admit that I have been a serial contextualist all along.<sup>22</sup>

As these examples and others can show, conceptions of context itself have become increasingly transtemporal, even if they have rarely been explicitly theorised in diachronic terms. To take just two outstanding examples, what was the rhetorical tradition since Aristotle, or possibly the *Ad Herennium*, but one diachronic but dynamic

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<sup>20</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, “Introduction”, in Rita Felski and Herbert F. Tucker, eds., “Context?”, *New Literary History* 42 (2011), p. ix.

<sup>21</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Quentin Skinner, “A Genealogy of the Modern State”, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162 (2009), pp. 325-70.

<sup>22</sup> David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

context within which Hobbes strategically elaborated his conception of language?<sup>23</sup> Or the long traditions of biblical exegesis and Christian Hebraism within which students of the Hebrew republic generated their arguments concerning exclusivist republicanism, egalitarian distributionism and religious toleration?<sup>24</sup> The works by Quentin Skinner and Eric Nelson treating these traditions are as rigorously contextualist as one might wish yet each sets synchronic engagements within diachronic traditions that are centuries, in fact millennia, old, even if they do not pretend to reconstruct every step in the transmission of those traditions as a more self-consciously serial contextualist work of the kind I have in mind might do.<sup>25</sup>

The outcome of an openly admitted and consistently pursued serial contextualism would be what I have called a *history in ideas*. I take this to be a genre of intellectual history in which episodes of contestation over meaning form the stepping-stones in a transtemporal narrative constructed over a span of time extending over decades, if not centuries. The “ideas” structuring this history would not be hypostatized entities, making intermittent entries into the mundane world from the idealism’s heavenly spheres, but rather focal points of arguments shaped and debated episodically across time with a conscious—or at least a provable connection—with both earlier and later instances of such struggles. Just as the history of the world has recently been suggestively told “in 100 objects” so a history in ideas can be narrated in a finite number of moments.<sup>26</sup> The chosen

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<sup>23</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Compare also Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), which runs from Plato to Tocqueville.

<sup>26</sup> Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

ideas should be linked through time, as well as in the freight of meanings they carry from their dialogue with the past and, occasionally, with the future. With these, perhaps rather abstract, prescriptions in mind, let me now give a sense of my ongoing attempt to write such a transtemporal, serially contextualist history in ideas around the key moments in the intellectual history of civil war from ancient Rome to the present.

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Civil war is a prime candidate for a “history in ideas” because it has a history with an identifiable beginning, in the first century BCE, but as yet no discernible end.<sup>27</sup> It resists reification because it is both evaluative and descriptive: it cannot be abstracted—despite distinguished attempts to do so—but must be historicised. It is also an indispensable item in our political vocabulary, yet one whose application to events is never without controversy. This is in part because “civil war” occurs in both technical discourses and non-expert speech: any one of us might think we know what civil war is when we see it (or have it reported to us), but there are multiple communities of experts, such as international lawyers, political scientists and politicians themselves, who will beg to differ. The history of how “civil war” was used over more than two thousand years has both semantic continuities and conceptual ruptures, all of which were contested at almost every point. However, its very ubiquity in contemporary language contrasts markedly with its near-absence in the first century after its invention, and its global circulation—through every European language and from those into other language groups—belies its

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<sup>27</sup> David Armitage, *Civil War: A History in Ideas* (New York: Knopf, forthcoming).

original specificity within Roman legal discourse. Conflict over its meaning, as much as the meaning of conflict, has characterised its history since the very beginning and remains a distinguishing feature of that history's continuing force over the present.

Civil war approximates an essentially contested concept in the terms made famous by the philosopher and occasional historian of ideas, W. B. Gallie. I say “approximates” because, unlike the examples of such concepts Gallie adduced—social justice, art, democracy, Christian doctrine—civil war, although what he called “appraisive”, is not uniformly positive as an evaluative term. However, it is internally complex—indeed, aboriginally oxymoronic, as we shall see; it is “variably describable” because it lacks an *a priori* definition; it is liable to revision in changing circumstances; and it has always been used aggressively and defensively for legitimation as much as for delegitimation. Its application may depend on whether you are a ruler or a rebel, the victor or the vanquished, an established government or an interested third party.<sup>28</sup> What to a ruler looks like a rebellion against their authority may be a civil war to the insurgents who aim to overturn that authority. And what to the combatants may look like a civil war, may instead be an insurgency, a revolution or simply a time of “troubles” to outside observers. This very contestability helped to make it what Michel Foucault called “the most disparaged of all wars”.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> W. B. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955-56), pp. 171-80. For a useful recent overview of the literature after Gallie, see David Collier, Fernando Daniel Hidalgo and Andra Olivia Maciuceanu, “Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications”, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11 (2006), pp. 211-46.

<sup>29</sup> “... la plus décriée des guerres ... la guerre civile”: Michel Foucault, letter of December 1972, in Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols. (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994), I, p. 42.

To show the essentially contested nature of civil war—and to show, at least partially, what my “history *in ideas*” of civil war will look like—let me now offer three transtemporal instances of how it has been used. The first example comes from the second-century Greek historian of Rome’s civil wars, Appian of Alexandria, writing in the second century CE. Appian wrote that, in the 80s BCE, the conflict between the competing generals Sulla and Marius,

... was the first conducted in Rome not under the guise of civil dissension, but nakedly as a war [*polemos*], with trumpets and military standards .... The episodes of civil strife escalated from rivalry and contentiousness to murder, and from murder to full-scale war; and this was the first army composed of Roman citizens to attack their own country as though it were a hostile power.<sup>30</sup>

Appian’s description has particular value because it comes from an historian writing in Greek, whose language and traditions contained no precise equivalent for the term “civil war”, a concept that was specifically and identifiably Roman in origin.<sup>31</sup> In the intellectual genealogy of civil war, as in so much else, all roads lead back to Rome.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. John Carter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 32-33 (I. 59-60).

<sup>31</sup> Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache and Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2002), pp. 24-25, 107-08.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Jal, *La guerre civile à Rome. Étude littéraire et morale* (Paris, 1963); Robert Brown, “The Terms *Bellum Sociale* and *Bellum Ciuile* in the Late Republic”, in Carl Deroux, ed., *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, 11 (Brussels, 2003), pp. 94-120; Brian Breed, Cynthia Damon and Andreola Rossi, eds., *Citizens of Discord: Rome and its Civil Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).



Roman conceptions of civil war provided material for contestation until well into the nineteenth century. Herman Melville wrote their belated epitaph when he marked the surrender at Appomattox in 1865 with a poem that began,

The warring eagles fold the wing,  
But not in Caesar's sway;  
Not Rome o'ercome by Roman arms we sing,  
As on Pharsalia's day,  
But treason thrown, though a giant grown,  
And freedom's larger play.<sup>33</sup>

Accordingly, my second example comes from the period when Roman conceptions of civil war had ceded primacy to a still more confused and contentious debate over the relations among such conceptions as “revolution”, “rebellion”, “insurgency” and civil war. It was the work of the nineteenth-century Prussian lawyer and first American professor of political science, Francis Lieber, in 1863:

Civil war is war between two or more portions of a country or state, each contending for the mastery of the whole, and each claiming to be the legitimate government. The term is also sometimes applied to war of

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<sup>33</sup> Herman Melville, “The Surrender at Appomattox” (April 1865), quoted in Richard Thomas, ““My brother got killed in the war”: Internecine Intertextuality”, in Breed, Damon and Rossi, eds., *Citizens of Discord*, p. 302-03.

rebellion, when the rebellious provinces or portions of the state are contiguous to those containing the seat of government.<sup>34</sup>

Lieber strove to be neutral in this definition, which he composed in the middle of what we all now know as the US Civil War, for inclusion in the first legal codification of the laws of war: the famous *General Orders no. 100* for the Union Army, better-known after its author as the Lieber Code. His definition lacked any precedent in the legal literature and was much more partisan and controversial in its own time than Lieber admitted. It did little to prevent later definitional controversy, even though the Lieber Code itself became in due course the model for the Geneva and Hague Conventions, as well as for a succession of US Army field manuals in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>35</sup>

My third and final example comes from the American social scientists Melvin Small and David Singer, who defined civil war in 1972 as:

... sustained military combat, primarily internal, resulting in at least 1000 battle-field deaths per year, pitting central government forces against an insurgent force capable of ... inflict[ing] upon the government forces at least 5 percent of the fatalities the insurgents sustain.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> [Francis Lieber,] *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1863), p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Shelly Hartigan, *Lieber's Code and the Law of War* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1983); John Witt, *Lincoln's Code: The Laws of War in American History* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Melvin Small and J. David Singer, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982), pp. 210-20.

Their definition was the product of much debate and confusion among social scientists during the Cold War about the difference between civil war and other kinds of “internal warfare” (riot, rebellion, revolution, insurgency) and every element of it was designed to secure the boundaries of the definition against imprecision: it had to be a war (rather than any other kind of large-scale violence); it had to be internal to an existing state, but not exclusively so, in order to include those civil wars that drew in outside forces; it had to exclude one-sided massacres and genocides; and it left open the motivations of the participants, even as it implied that one side had legitimacy (“central government forces”) while the other did not (“an insurgent force”).

Each of these three overlapping definitions—from the second, the mid-nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries—exemplifies one broad era in the transtemporal history of civil war: Appian’s, a Roman, descriptive and historical conception which was the product of two centuries of discussion among Roman historians, poets, orators and jurists about Rome’s own successive and repetitive conflicts; Lieber’s, a Euro-American, normative and legal conception which he had cut from whole cloth and hoped might clarify confusion on the issue; and Small and Singer’s, an American but ultimately global, empirical and social-scientific definition which sprang from a ferment among social scientists in need of a definition to help them analyse big data. All three definitions have left their mark on how we currently understand civil war, though each has been contentious and much argued-over.

Civil war was essentially contested because, from the very beginning, it was internally contested. The Romans generally named their wars after their adversaries (Hannibalic, Jugurthine, Servile ...) and this practice made civil war particularly fraught.

The term was probably coined—I use the passive advisedly because its inventor is unknown—on the analogy of the civil law (*ius civile*), but *bellum civile* meant more precisely a war against *cives* or citizens. Rome’s wars were, by definition, fought against external enemies, or *hostes*, the literally hostile antitheses to those who were bound into the *civitas* by the common ties of citizenship. And to be a war, a *bellum*, it had to be just, which a contention against one’s fellow-citizens by definition could not be.<sup>37</sup>

The paradoxical, even oxymoronic, nature of *bellum civile*—a war that could not be justified as a war, fought against enemies who could not be called enemies—accounts for the overwhelming Roman reticence on the topic of civil war well into the first century CE. Yet, by the time Appian composed his history of Rome’s intestine conflicts, war between citizens had occurred so often, and its shape had become so sharply defined, that his description of Sulla’s march on the city encapsulated a consensus on its form. Trumpets and standards were the visible signs, conventional warfare the means, and control of Rome the aim: all told, these were the identifying marks of civil war rather than the signs of mere tumult, dissension or sedition. Appian also implied the existence of a narrative, within which Sulla’s assault was the original episode.

The works of Caesar, Sallust, Lucan, Tacitus, Plutarch, Appian, Florus and Augustine, to name only the most prominent, transmitted versions of that narrative throughout the Latin West until at least the late eighteenth century. There was what might be called the republican narrative of seemingly endless and recurrent civil wars arising from the very fabric of Roman civilisation itself: to be civilised at all was to be prone to

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<sup>37</sup> Veit Rosenberger, *Bella et expeditiones. Die antike Terminologie der Kriege Roms* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992); Brown, “The Terms *Bellum Sociale* and *Bellum Civile* in the Late Republic”.

civil war, and to suffer one civil war opened the way for further destructive dissensions within the commonwealth. Then there was a parallel imperial or Augustan narrative, which followed much the same pattern but held that the only cure for the pathology of civil war would be the restoration of monarchy or the exaltation of an emperor. “In this way”, wrote Appian, “the Roman polity survived all kinds of civil disturbances to reach unity and monarchy”: “an evident demonstration”, agreed his late sixteenth-century English translator, “That peoples rule must give place, and Princes power prevayle.”<sup>38</sup> And finally there was a Christian narrative, constructed most famously by Augustine, the last great Roman historian, which presented Rome’s pagan history as a catalogue of “those evils which were more infernal because internal” (*quanto interiora, tanto miseriora*), a series of “civil, or rather uncivil, discords” (*discordiae civiles vel potius inciviles*).<sup>39</sup> The popularity of these narratives of civil war as repetitive, cumulative and transformative, declined only in the period historians call “the Age of Revolutions”, when another narrative—of revolutions as similarly recurrent, sequential and transtemporal—began to dethrone it.<sup>40</sup> As self-conscious revolutionaries rebranded civil wars as revolutions, it was no coincidence that, for instance, editions of the great Roman poet of civil war, Lucan, which had been issued almost annually across the eighteenth century,

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<sup>38</sup> Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. Carter, p. 4 (I. 6); [Appian,] *An Auncient Historie and exquisite Chronicle of the Romane warres, both Civile and Foren* (London: Raufé Newbery and Henrie Bynniman, 1578), title-page.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 132 (III. 23).

<sup>40</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, et al., “Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg”, in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1972-97), V, pp. 712-14, 726-27, 778-80; Roman Schnur, *Rivoluzione e guerra civile*, ed. Pier Paolo Portinaro (Milan: Giuffrè, 1986); David Armitage, “Every Great Revolution is a Civil War”, in Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein, eds., *Scripting Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

ceased, not to re-emerge into prominence until a later age of civil wars in the late twentieth century.<sup>41</sup>

Roman conceptions of civil war began as strictly legal but expanded to become literary and historical. The much later legal re-definition of civil war attempted by Francis Lieber occurred in a radically altered context in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1863, the US Supreme Court ruled on four cases, known collectively as the Prize Cases, arising from President Lincoln's order in April 1861 to blockade ports from Chesapeake Bay to the mouth of the Rio Grande on the grounds that the states of the Confederacy had raised "an insurrection against the Government of the United States." The plaintiffs argued that the Presidential had applied the laws of war to a situation in which they were not operative because no war had been declared. Writing for the majority, Justice Robert Grier argued that the US was indeed at war with the Southern Confederacy: "A civil war is never solemnly declared; it becomes such by its accidents—the number, power, and organization of the persons who originate and carry it on."<sup>42</sup> In the immediate wake of that decision, the head of the Union Army, General Henry Halleck, commissioned Francis Lieber to write the first set of codified rules for land warfare. When Lieber sent his initial draft to Halleck in February 1863, the General objected that it lacked one crucial component: a definition of the peculiar kind of internal conflict in which his Army had been engaged for over a year. As he wrote to Lieber, "to be more useful at the present

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<sup>41</sup> On Lucan's reception history, see the relevant chapters in Paolo Asso, ed., *Brill's Companion to Lucan* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>42</sup> *The Prize Cases*, 67 U.S. 635 (1863); Brian McGinty, *Lincoln and the Court* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 118-43; Thomas H. Lee and Michael D. Ramsey, "The Story of the *Prize Cases*: Executive Action and Judicial Review in Wartime", in Christopher H. Schroeder and Curtis A. Bradley, eds., *Presidential Power Stories* (New York: Foundation Press, 2009), pp. 53-92.

time [the Code] should embrace civil war as well as war between states or *distinct* sovereignties.”<sup>43</sup>

Yet according to Lieber’s final definition—“war between two or more portions of a country or state, each contending for the mastery of the whole, and each claiming to be the legitimate government”—the American “Civil War” was not a civil war at all. It may have been fought between two parts of the country, but only one side aimed at overall mastery or claimed to be the legitimate government over the whole territory. By his own reckoning, the Civil War was in fact a *rebellion*: “an insurrection of large extent, and is usually a war between the legitimate government of a country and portions or provinces of the same who seek to throw off their allegiance to it and set up a government of their own.” Indeed, he admitted as much in the second half of his definition of civil war: “sometimes applied to war of rebellion, when the rebellious provinces or portions of the state are contiguous to those containing the seat of government”—hence, presumably, the official Union designation in the late nineteenth century of it as the War of the Rebellion.<sup>44</sup>

These definitional difficulties notwithstanding, the Lieber Code became the foundation-stone for all later international humanitarian law, and it was reprinted in its entirety, including its definitions of insurrection, rebellion and civil war, for use during the Philippine-American War in 1902, and its discussion of civil war appeared repeatedly

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<sup>43</sup> Henry Halleck, annotation to [Francis Lieber,] *A Code for the Government of Armies in the Field, As Authorized by the Laws and Usages of War on Land*, “Printed as manuscript for the Board appointed by the Secretary of War” (February 1863), pp. 25-[6], The Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, 243077.

<sup>44</sup> [Lieber,] *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*, p. 25; [United States, Department of War,] *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1880-91).

until 1940. Only in 1990 did the US Army attempt a new definition of civil war, a conception reduced *ad absurdum* when the Army's 2008 Operations Manual devoted barely a single paragraph of its 180 tightly-packed pages to civil wars, noting only that they "often include major combat operations" and can lead to "massive casualties".<sup>45</sup> The disjunction between Americans' historical memory of their own internal conflict and the experience of civil wars abroad was complete.

The gradual global shift away from interstate to intrastate warfare after 1945, when combined with the rise of the positivist social sciences and the crises of decolonisation, generated new pressures for a definition of what was, and what was not, civil war. Beginning in the 1960s, American social scientists became increasingly invested in the interpretation of what was called broadly "internal warfare", a category that encompassed everything from guerrilla warfare and insurgencies to civil wars, coups and revolutions.<sup>46</sup> The expansiveness of the category generated anxiety about a lack of theoretical focus and dissatisfaction that the examples were too heterogeneous to be codified or counted. Data could not be theorized and theories lacked supporting data.

It was to solve this quandary that Melvin Small and David Singer generated the third definition of civil war I quoted earlier. They demanded a quantitative, rather than a qualitative definition "to minimize subjective bias" and, more pointedly, to "facilitate the construction of a data set", as a means of escaping what they deemed the conceptual morass of competing and inconsistent definitions of civil war.<sup>47</sup> The greatest problem

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<sup>45</sup> US Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0 (27 February 2008), § 2-67: [www.army.mil/fm3-0/fm3-0.pdf](http://www.army.mil/fm3-0/fm3-0.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Harry Eckstein, "On the Etiology of Internal Wars", *History and Theory* 4 (1965), pp. 33-63; Jesse Orlansky, *The State of Research on Internal War, Research Paper P-565* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, Science and Technology Division, 1970).

<sup>47</sup> Small and Singer, *Resort to Arms*, p. 210.



with their definition is the number of conflicts it does *not* encompass. Their cut-off of 1000 battlefield deaths annually would exclude the Troubles in Northern Ireland, for which the death-toll was around 3500 fatalities between 1969 and 2001, with a peak of 479 in 1972. The condition of being “primarily internal” was specified as being “internal to the *metropole*”, in order deliberately to exclude post-colonial wars of national liberation like the Algerian War. For all its striving to be neutral and objective, this idea of civil war was in fact highly contingent and contestable.<sup>48</sup> To paraphrase Winston Churchill, it was perhaps the worst definition of civil war one could imagine—except every other one that has been proposed over the last two centuries. This would hardly matter, were it not for the fact that it remains the reigning metric for a civil war among social scientists, and is thus the basis for data supplied to institutions like the World Bank and the US State Department as they decide levels of country risk in apportioning aid or as they weigh the possibilities for humanitarian intervention in conflicts deemed to be “civil”.

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I have chosen these three key examples from my history in ideas to illustrate both the synchronic and the diachronic dimensions of this emergent genre. Each instance can be seen to engage in a conscious dialogue with the past history, conceptual and experiential, of civil war. Appian, because writing in Greek, was compelled to assimilate

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<sup>48</sup> Jan Angstrom, “Towards a Typology of Internal Armed Conflict: Synthesising a Decade of Conceptual Turmoil”, *Civil Wars* 4 (2001), pp. 93-116; Nicholas Sambanis, “What is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48 (2004), pp. 814-58.

Rome's civil wars semantically to the Greek term *emphyilia*, even though his precisely tailored description of those conflicts showed the great gap between the word and the concept, between Greek and Roman conceptions of civil strife.<sup>49</sup> Francis Lieber had searched the corpus of international law for a legal definition of civil war, but found none; likewise, he had to define it against revolution, rebellion and insurrection—civil war's not entirely asymmetric counter-concepts, as one might call them<sup>50</sup>—in an effort directed at ameliorating a specific conflict, within a tightly defined legal context, but with an eye to the humanisation of warfare in the future. Finally, Singer and Small sought to transcend contextual determinants to create a transhistorical definition of civil war that revealed only the marks of its highly contingent birth. Yet their conception not only lingers but flourishes to this day, in tension with legal conceptions of civil war ultimately descended from Lieber and with historical conceptions whose roots are identifiably Roman.

But examples can be no more than exemplary; symptoms cannot approximate systems. Even my procedure of combining close, synchronic contextualisation with much broader diachronic sweeps of the *longue durée* may soon appear to be unfashionable and outdated rather than dashing *avant-garde*. The manual accumulation and analysis of sources, to which intellectual historians have been accustomed for a century (and other historians for much longer), is not becoming obsolete, but it is ever increasingly incomplete: “distant reading” of large accumulations of sources now supplements close

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<sup>49</sup> Paula Botteri, “*Stásis*: Le Mot grec, la chose romaine”, *Métis* 4 (1989), pp. 87-100.

<sup>50</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, “The Historical-Political Semantics of Asymmetric Counterconcepts”, in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 155-91; Kay Junge and Kirill Postoutenko, eds., *Asymmetrical Concepts After Reinhart Koselleck: Historical Semantics and Beyond* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011).

reading but cannot replace it.<sup>51</sup> The digital revolution's effects are only just beginning to be felt among intellectual historians but they will surely be transformative, both in terms of the sheer scale of materials available for analysis and the range of technologies to hand for solving old problems and for suggesting new questions.

Vast collections of sources which would, until recently, have taken an individual scholar a lifetime (or more) to collect are now available to undergraduate students and the general public alike in the form of digital collections and databases. [Google Books](#), the [Internet Archive](#), the [HathiTrust Digital Library](#), the [Open Library](#) and soon the [Digital Public Library of America](#)—to name only the largest of those that are primarily in English and open-access—offer searchable versions of historical materials formerly only accessible to credentialed researchers in brick-and-mortar repositories. Before very long, thanks to these initiatives, the [Europeana](#) project and other national digital libraries, everything printed—in Western languages at least—from 1455 to 1922 will be readable and most of it will be searchable. This cornucopia of digital material is not confined to living languages from the last five hundred years: roughly one billion words of Latin from the period 200 BCE to 1922 CE have already been digitised, “eclips[ing] the corpus of Classical Latin by several orders of magnitude” and “arguably span[ning] the greatest historical distance of any major textual collection today.” This uncured collection cannot be used innocently or even yet very easily but its range and scope illustrates the dizzying possibilities for research over the *longue durée* offered by digitisation.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review* 1 (2000), pp. 56-58; Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>52</sup> David Bamman and David Smith, “Extracting Two Thousand Years of Latin from a Million Book Library”, *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage* 5 (2012), pp. 1–13.

Digital tools for humanities research have existed for more than half a century: “In His mercy, around 1955, God led men to invent magnetic tapes”, wrote the pioneering computational humanist, Roberto Busa, SJ.<sup>53</sup> But their power and variety have exploded more recently under the rubric of the “digital humanities”, with new techniques for the quantification of textual data competing with novel means for visualisation and spatial analysis. The most familiar tools by now are the [N-gram Viewer](#) which graphically reveals patterns of word-frequency in the corpus of Google Books, the 4% (and rising) of all books published in English, Spanish, Hebrew and other languages since 1800 and [Bookworm](#), which allows similar analysis of the [Open Library](#) and [Internet Archive](#) collections.<sup>54</sup> So far, these tools can only be indicative rather than conclusive. They can suggest questions but cannot provide answers in isolation from other forms of textual immersion and comparison. The databases on which they rely are not yet complete and are not all fully readable; they also vary in their coverage and reliability. Yet handled with care and supplemented with immersive reading in samples of sources, key-word searches can generate robust conclusions and point the way to novel inquiries. On this basis, more traditional procedures of intellectual history—such as conceptual analysis and contextualisation—can also proceed with ever greater confidence in the soundness of generalisations about both qualitative and quantitative change over time.

Even to more traditional analogue humanists, the promise of the digital humanities for transforming the work of intellectual historians is immense. The

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<sup>53</sup> Roberto A. Busa, “Foreword: Perspectives on the Digital Humanities”, in Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth, eds., *Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. xvii.

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Baptiste Michel, Yuan Kui Shen, Aviva Presser Aiden, Adrian Veres, Matthew K. Gray, Joseph P. Pickett, Dale Hoiberg, et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books”, *Science* 331, no. 6014 (January 14, 2011), pp. 176-82.

increasing availability of vastly larger corpora of texts and the tools to analyse them allows historians to establish the conventions that framed intellectual innovation, and hence to show where individual agency took place within collective structures. And with ever greater flexibility for searching and recovering contextual information, we can discover more precisely and persuasively moments of rupture as well as stretches of continuity. In short, we now have both the methodological tools and the technological means to overcome most, if not all, of the traditional objections to the marriage of intellectual history with the *longue durée*. We can at last get back to studying big ideas in a big way.

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