# What Happened to Revolutions? Koselleck's "Saddle Time" and the Breaking of Modernity

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Good morning. After yesterday's two stimulating sessions and the equally vibrant conversation at dinner, it is a pleasure to welcome you all to the Workshop's "traditional" meeting space [Distinguished Alumni Room, Indiana Memorial Union] which is (as Fritz Breithaupt noted yesterday) particularly conducive to conversations. When we were reviewing submitted abstracts, the Steering Committee noted only two repeated points of reference among the proposals we received: Louis Sébastien Mercier's *The Year 2440* and Reinhart Koselleck's *Futures Past*. It hence seemed useful to spend some time in conversations prompted by each of these texts (even in the absence of their authors). Even more than Joanna Stalnaker or Alex Tipei in their comments yesterday on Mercier, I am in no position to speak *for* the author whose work I am introducing—it is clear that many of you are more intimately familiar with Koselleck's oeuvre (and how it continues to be built upon, especially in the German-speaking world) than am I. So my role today is not as an "expert," but instead it is to position this work in the context of the broader field of Eighteenth-Century Studies (especially as that field is constituted in the United State), to throw out a few observations by way of provocations, and then to moderate the conversation that emerges among all of you.

For those of you with an interest in biographical criticism: Reinhart Koselleck was born in 1926 and as a young man (a very young man) served in the Wehrmacht and spent more than a year in a POW camp in Kazakhstan. Trained as a political philosopher and intellectual historian (he had a particularly close relationship with Karl Schmitt—Schmitt was no longer teaching in the German university system because of his connection to the Nazis, but Koselleck met him socially—and he read Heidegger in Gadamer's seminar at Heidelberg), Koselleck was appointed in 1974 as professor of history at the University of Bielefeld (almost certainly the most significant center for social, cultural, historical research in the West Germany of the 1970s-1980s). The text we have today was first published in German in 1979—a year after Said's *Orientalism*, two years after the English translation of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and both seventeen years after the initial publication of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and a decade before that work's publication in English. (*Futures Past* first appeared in English in 1985.) Like the three other texts I've just mentioned [all of which were absolutely crucial for the late 1980s-1990s version of *historicist* eighteenth-century studies, in which our own Center is rooted], *Futures Past* (and Koselleck's work more generally) assigns special significance to the period 1750-1850—i.e., to that part of the "eighteenth century" that falls after the research specialization of Dave Alff and Richard Nash. In other contexts, this era has been called the Age of democratic, cultural, or Atlantic revolutions, but in Koselleckian terms, it is the *Sattelzeit*—a "saddle time" of transition between premodern and modern regimes of historicity. (Daniel Fulda's paper offers a crucial challenge to this chronology, one that—as Fritz mentioned briefly yesterday—implicitly calls for re-thinking the causal relation posited between ideas, politics, and practices.) It seems to me that Koselleck's key claim—that there was a point in the past when thinking about the past changed—differs from the arguments of the other works I just mentioned in very

significant ways, but it nonetheless shares with them the idea that "once upon a time, the world was one way… and then it was another." The real issue, of course, is how that change was effected.

This brings me to my first provocation: I would like us to think about what's at stake in the move from an Age of Revolutions—which, for all that it may be an "age" nonetheless posits radical breaks and definite ruptures (in intention if not realization)—to that of a century-long, transitional "saddle." Some fast searching on JSTOR suggests that *Futures Past* (and Koselleck's work more generally) is still in its citation ascendancy (roughly three times more citations in the most recent decade than in the previous one and *that* one saw two times the citations of the decade before it). I see this as part of a trend among Europeanists more generally—but not among scholars of the Atlantic World (who it should be noted, barely responded at all to our call for papers [and our local Atlanticists were in attendance yesterday, but are not here this morning!])—away from "revolution" as subject of study. In my own area of geographic specialization (France), there has certainly been a tendency for the bright young things to move away from the shocks and mess of the 1790s, and instead to see in various developments over the course of the eighteenth century "the origins of the French Revolution." Michael Kwass's two excellent books both do this, as does Paul Cheney's *Revolutionary Commerce*—as if accounting for "origins" or "novelty" is all that needs to happen to explain a revolution (the energy goes into identifying specific instances of the former, rather than understanding the processes of the latter). How is it that we can have a Workshop on Eighteenth-Century Futures in which "evolution" not "revolution" is a central concept and in which Romantic poets get more airtime than do Robespierre, Brissot, or the French, Republican calendar? What does our apparently collective move away from "revolution"—and again here, I want to bracket Dave Alff and Richard Nash, because they have a *Glorious* Revolution and are happy to talk about it—suggest about the future of our field? How can we bring interest in changing regimes of historicity and transformed temporal perceptions into conversation with work on the Atlantic slave trade and the place of commerce and violence more generally in the transnational movement of people and goods—or do we want to? Has the apparent eclipse of "the transition to capitalism" as a category of analysis resulted in a bifurcated future for Eighteenth-Century Studies? (With Continental Europeanists on one side; littoral Europeanists and Americanists, Atlanticists on the other. But, really, I think it may be a trifurcated future, because the Dryden-Defoe-Swift-Pope folks are rarely part of either of these conversations.)

Closely related is my concern with—and general distaste for—the concept of "modernity" (this isn't anything "new" for me). Writing of the painting commissioned in 1528 by Duke William IV of Bavaria, Koselleck writes: "From their feet to their turbans, most of the Persians resemble the Turks who in the same year the picture was painted, unsuccessfully laid siege to Vienna. In other words, the event that Altdorfer captured was for him at once historical and contemporary" (p.10). We should acknowledge that Altdorfer was hence producing what Michael Cooperson learnedly and conclusively refers to as "Orientalist claptrap" (no difference between Persians and Turks) but what I want to linger on here is the notion of representing the past as both "historical and contemporary." This, I think, is the work done by the concept "modernity": it allows scholars to say "I have found some key facet of our contemporary world—anything from novel reading and the perception of time to global capital flows and notions of selfhood—in the past and

hence this explains how we got to be in the world we inhabit today." As Helge Jordheim noted several times yesterday already, this move on the part of dix-huitièmistes leapfrogs over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: apparently, nothing happened then. And when that move is made, as it sometimes is, by colleagues working on the seventeenth, sixteenth, or fifteenth centuries, the jump is all the more dramatic. Time collapses when it's implied that having found one aspect of our present configuration all the others come along with it. We see this move so often, I think, because it is perceived to be central—I don't think it has to be—to claiming a future *for* Eighteenth-Century Studies. If "our" world today (whosoever's world that might be—and I am pretty sure it isn't everybody's) came into existence at that moment in the 1700s when readers started to sympathize with characters in novels, or when individuals started to think of themselves as "selves," or when whatever key "modern" thing first happened, then Eighteenth-Century Studies gets to be as "relevant" for twenty-first-century curricula (because it's the same thing) as are "clinical neuroscience" and "sustainability studies" or any of the other things that contemporary universities think they need.

As presented in the chapter of *Futures Past* we have to discuss (much as in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*), "modernity" results from and requires the eclipse of religious world views. (It's striking in this context that our Workshop cfp did not elicit any papers about the afterlife.) The "early modern political consciousness of time," Koselleck claimed was not so different from Christian eschatology because there were so few real political actors. The future might not be prophesied, but it could be predicted (this is what Daniel Fulda's paper yesterday challenged, by saying that already in 1700 there were more political actors than anyone could have counted). Only a philosophy of "historical process"—and it seems here that *process* and progress are being used interchangeably (this may be an effect of the translation?)—first detached early modernity from its past and with a new future, inaugurated our modernity. I think it's worth asking how widespread this new philosophy was: I am thinking here of Marx and Engels saying at the beginning of *The German Ideology*, "and all of these changes have happened in the realm of pure thought." Given that most people don't in fact read historiography, how can it be that a change in historiography transforms how people experience history?

This philosophy of "historical process" on Koselleck's telling was "transnatural" (and I don't think he means that as a compliment) while the "self-accelerating tempo robs the present of the possibility of being experienced as present" (hence the vogue for "mindfulness"). Maybe it's because I just finished teaching a course on past and future in nineteenth-century Europe, but I can't help but hear some echoes of Carlyle's "mechanistic age" in Koselleck's account of modernity.

The second short piece we had, the interview with Yves Citton and Myriam Revaut D'Allonnes is striking, I think, for the way that its conceptual concerns echo Koselleck's even as its politics very clearly do not. It may help us to think about how our very contemporary concern with "neoliberalism" and "late consumer capitalism" transposes the basic concept of "modernity" (shifts it almost musically)—from the brightness of the Jetsons and Star Trek to a decidedly darker, more minor key—but leaves many of the initial assumptions and tropes in place. Eighteenth-Century Studies, I think, tends to do this as well: leaves the basic structuring ideas of modernity and "the modern" in place, even as it moves from (say) seeing the Enlightenment as a "recovery of nerve" (Peter Gay's formulation) to treating it as a precursor of totalitarianism. Can we instead consider the

possibility of multiple registers of time, competing temporalities? With different senses of time, wouldn't there also be different futures—not just a single eighteenth-century future, but many of them? (this begins to sound almost Braudelian, with time moving at different rates) For myself, I'd like to see an Eighteenth-Century Studies that was more attentive to social difference and concerned with articulating the relation (if only one of distance and non-recognition) between the temporal concerns of high culture and the lives of ordinary people. Theater and performance studies do seem one particularly fruitful way of doing this (insofar as theater really is a mass medium in the century), but this was another sub-field that did not respond to our call for papers.

In conclusion, I will note that Revault d'Allonnes and Cittot suggest that effective political action depends on the strategic "synchronization" of these different temporalities, an argument that for me recalls William Sewell's analysis of the storming of the Bastille. Synchronization, in that case, happened *after* the fact: what had been on the day perceived as a crisis came within a week or so to be the people "reclaiming their liberty"—an act coordinated with the political demands being made by the deputies in Versailles. Does political change therefore require different agents literally acting "at the same time," or is it a matter of how their acts are remembered, how effectively they can be brought into a single, narrative temporality?