

## World into Globe IV: History as a Tool of Foresight

Wolf Schäfer

Stony Brook University  
Center for Global History

**Abstract:** Revisiting Bruce Mazlish's *The Railroad and the Space Program* (1965), a pioneering study of history as a tool of foresight, this contribution to *World into Globe* asks: Why is learning from history not the main objective of professional historiography? Recalling the Ciceronian dictum of history as the teacher of life, the opposition to this earlier status of history is traced back to Leopold von Ranke. In turn, Ranke's anti-Ciceronian stance is explained with recourse to Reinhart Koselleck's theory of the *Sattelzeit*. Koselleck's "saddle time" posits an epochal transition between 1750 and 1850 in which a new temporality privileging the future supplanted the traditional temporality that had elevated the past. The essay concludes with a renewal of the question that prompted it.

**Keywords:** Cicero, Koselleck, Mazlish, modernity, Ranke, Sattelzeit, temporality

HISTORIA MAGISTRA VITAE — History is the teacher of life  
Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, 9, 36

- 1 In 1977, William McNeill observed: "If Pleistocene extinctions were the work of human hunters, that catastrophic ancient overkill closely parallels our modern industrial squandering of fossil fuels." Then he noted a difference: "moderns will probably require fewer centuries to destroy the principal energy base of their existence than our prehistoric forebears needed to kill off theirs."<sup>[1]</sup> Let me start from this difference.
- 2 Pleistocene hunters had no clue about their overexploitation of large herbivores and the carnivores that fed on them. Blessed by global ignorance, they seem to have hunted numerous species to extinction without ever grasping the full extent of their destructive behavior. Yet we know this story. Thanks to modern science, archeology, anthropology, and history, we can date various extinction episodes on different landmasses and distinguish human impact from the effects of meteoric catastrophes and climate change. We understand why Africa, the continent where humans originated and evolved alongside their prey animals, retained a comparatively wide variety of megafauna, whereas the global regions where humans arrived later, suffered radical losses.
- 3 McNeill's other observation – that modern humans have acquired increased and accelerated technical capacities for catastrophic overkill – displays a second crucial difference: we also know a whole lot about contemporary history including pervasive trends like global warming that reach into the future and tempt us to share McNeill's pessimistic conclusion. Nonetheless, a historically informed sense of danger is also a cause for optimism. Humankind's historical knowledge has increased enormously in the last 200 years and can be used as a survival tool for life on this planet. Hunters and gatherers had not much history to learn from, we, however, have prodigious amounts. Hence, we can try to use our history for guidance. And why not? Why are we not exploring history as a tool of foresight to provide us with pointers for a sustainable energy future? Corrections to the globalizing way of our industrial life are obviously in order and yet, we are not putting our historical smarts to work on contemporary problems. Why are we not trying to get ahead by looking back?

- 4 Nearly half a century ago, a foray into getting ahead by looking back was launched by Bruce Mazlish. In 1965, Mazlish assembled *The Railroad and the Space Program: An Exploration in Historical Analogy*. Trying to gauge the social impact of NASA's space program, Mazlish asked "whether the study of the past could serve as a 'device of anticipation' for the future."<sup>[2]</sup> To answer this daring question, he and his collaborators set out to create "a prototype for future 'impact' studies" by comparing nineteenth century railways and twentieth century space exploration as "social inventions." Thus, Mazlish, Alfred Chandler, Thomas Hughes, Leo Marx, and a few others experimented with history as a tool of foresight. Investigating "the possibility of moving up onto a level of abstraction where the terrain of the past is suggestive of the topography of the present and its future projection."<sup>[3]</sup> Mazlish and his coworkers produced a pioneering study. To this day, *The Railroad and the Space Program* is still unique – and therein lies a problem well worth reflecting upon. Why have anticipation studies not taken off after the Mazlish volume and created a historical tool of foresight?
- 5 The contemporary reluctance<sup>[4]</sup> to use history as a tool of foresight is rooted in the disciplinary development of modern historiography, which made learning from history unscientific. Actually, learning from history had been the rule since Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), but modern historiography broke with this venerable tradition.
- 6 Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) declared in 1821: "The historian's task is to present what actually happened. The more purely and completely he achieves this, the more perfectly has he solved his problem."<sup>[5]</sup> Three years later, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) decreed in *Histories of the Latin and German Peoples* (1824) that learning from history was *verboten*. Echoing Humboldt, Ranke insisted that it is *not* the business of the historian to judge the past "for the benefit of future generations" but rather show *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – as it actually was.<sup>[6]</sup>
- 7 What Ranke wrote in 1824 demonstrated a young historian's plucky irreverence for Ciceronian history as *magistra vitae* – teacher of life. Repositioning history as a field of factual inquiry, Ranke suggested a paradigm shift: dethrone Ciceronian history and reconfigure the field based on historical-critical research. At the time, all readers understood the radical thrust of Ranke's project. Today, fact-based history has lost its cutting edge and hardly any historian remembers that it was paid for with giving up on learning from history.
- 8 The Ciceronian trope of history as the teacher of life had reigned for nearly two thousand years, yet between 1750 and 1850 it was abandoned, and Ranke helped to hasten its demise. Thus, a paradox is emerging. Robust information about the past was not available when history was humanity's acknowledged teacher, but when modern history was beginning to gain reliable knowledge about the past, Ciceronian history fell from grace.
- 9 From a history of science point of view, Ranke's factualist turn was acute and timely. Following Antoine Laurent Lavoisier's (1743-1794) antiphlogiston chemistry, Ranke replicated the revolutionary progress from alchemy to chemistry by making history and its research methods as *wissenschaftlich* (scientific) as possible. In an epistemological environment that was increasingly fascinated and dominated by the natural sciences, this meant that the basis for historical statements had to be something real from the past.
- 10 Freeing history from the "elevated task" of guiding the perplexed, Ranke privileged the historical archive and its mundane documents as the categorical database of modern historiography. Unabbreviated, his maxim stated:

The task of judging the past for the benefit of future generations has been given to History: the present essay does not aspire to such an elevated task; it merely seeks to show the past as it once was.<sup>[7]</sup>

- 11 Ranke's demotion of *historia magistra vitae* was even clearer in the slightly more expansive nineteenth century German, which expressly rejected not only history's task of judging (*richten*) the past but also of teaching (*belehren*) the *Mitwelt* ("with-world") of fellow humans about the future:

*Man hat der Historie das Amt, die Vergangenheit zu richten, die Mitwelt zum Nutzen zukünftiger Jahre zu belehren, beygemessen: so hoher Aemter unterwindet sich gegenwärtiger Versuch nicht: er will bloß sagen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.*<sup>[8]</sup>

- 12 Cicero's Latin was of course also a bit longer and richer than the motto of this brief essay:

*historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis* (history is the true witness of times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the messenger of

antiquity).[9]

- 13 The last of the five Ciceronian qualities of history – to be “the messenger of antiquity” – is important for what I would like to discuss next: the traditional eminence and authority of the past as the container of exemplary experience.
- 14 In a Ciceronian world, the past is the repository of all great achievements and potential lessons; therefore, the temporal horizons of the present and the future defer to the past. Ranke, however, envisioned a post-Ciceronian world – our world – that does no longer see “the light of truth” in the past. Consequently, we may wonder, how did Clio lose her classical assignment to be the teacher of life?
- 15 The trope’s authority began to erode before the French and industrial revolutions had serious practical and theoretical consequences, hence these major historical events cannot be our best answer. And since we are dealing with Ranke’s successful effort to end the privileging of the past as teacher, we may reasonably expect a new temporal order of things in which the temporality of the present or the future trumps the temporality of the past. With other words, we need to see the rise to prominence of another temporal horizon and the concurrent decline of the past from its received distinction.
- 16 The late Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006) provided the historical confirmation of such a change with scores of evidence. Perhaps the most brilliant German historian of the last century, Koselleck approached the reversal of temporal horizons on the granular level of key political and social terms. Based on the hypothesis that the gradual establishment of European modernity created a temporal rift between 1750 and 1850, he observed the transition to a modern time horizon in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, [10] a magisterial lexicon of nine volumes and over nine thousand pages.
- 17 Koselleck and his contributors explored the separation of two horizons of societal time in semantic action: one horizon privileged the past, the other favored the future. The former lasted until about 1750; the latter became dominant after 1850. Turning the temporal orientation of traditional societies away from the past and toward the future constituted modern societies. This epochal movement from one time horizon to the other marked one hundred years of fundamental temporality change. Koselleck called it the *Sattelzeit* (saddle time).[11]
- 18 Modern societies, which began to observe the horizon of the future, emerged on one side of Koselleck’s divide; past-observing societies stayed behind on the other. Future-observing societies branched off from societies ruled by the past and lost track of the traditional, non-modern worldview, which is why the anti-Ciceronian point of Ranke’s maxim is now in effect forgotten.
- 19 The transition to the future-oriented mentality of a modern society was, in Koselleck’s words, “a complex process whose course is in part invisible and gradual, sometimes sudden and abrupt, and which is ultimately driven forward consciously.”[12] Observing the shifting use of terms allowed Koselleck to “read” peoples’ minds, detect subtle changes in their thinking, and trace the rifting process for the critical years between 1750 and 1850 via *sprachgeschichtliche Ereignisse*, philological events.[13] Letters, tracts, pamphlets, books, dictionaries, and encyclopedias manifested the paradigm shift from the prevalence of the past to the preponderance of the future[14] One eloquent example – Alexis de Tocqueville’s final reflection about the “society of the modern world”[15] – laments the waning power of the past to illuminate the future:

I go back from age to age to the remotest antiquity; but find no parallel to what is occurring before my eyes: as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity.[16]
- 20 In Tocqueville’s anxious words, Koselleck registered the rising horizon of an open future. He noted the dis- and reorienting experience in these language events and described *neuzeitlich bewegte Geschichte*[17] as the “newly emergent temporality”[18] of a future-oriented society. By refusing to mine the past for historical lessons, Ranke’s dictum manifested this new temporality. The witty conclusion that was quickly drawn at the time – “One learns from history nothing but history”[19] – already presaged Henry Ford’s quip that history “is more or less bunk.”[20]
- 21 As already mentioned, the successful revolutions of modern science provided another powerful context for the Rankean movement towards the new ideal of historical objectivity.[21] Three centuries of new and systematic scientific research had built up an impressive track record. What had started ambiguously with the Copernican revolution and the slow transition from astrology to astronomy, soon included Galileo’s *Two New Sciences* (1638), Robert Boyle’s “physico-mechanicall” experiments (1660), and Isaac Newton’s universal law of gravitation (*Principia Mathematica* 1687). By the time of Ranke’s birth, modern science had extinguished

phlogiston, led to the discovery of oxygen, and turned alchemy into chemistry via laboratory research. Yet probably even more important than these feats was the discovery of the self-perpetuating power of research.

- 22 Modern science established scrupulous hands-on research as the best routine for putting the advancement of knowledge on a continuous trajectory. Lavoisier's careful weighing of things before and after combustion (stoichiometry) and Ranke's philological scrutiny of historical documents were kindred moves and linked the laboratory and the archive in theory and practice. The benches and tables in both places provided the professional space for regular, normatively neutral, evidentiary research. Finding the laws of nature by "touching the spring of the air" (Boyle) and methodically extracting the facts of history from archival documents are not only very much alike, they are epistemological twins.
- 23 Yet history as an academic discipline is encumbered by Ranke's legacy of relevance lost and objectivity gained. It has engendered a historiography for the sake of the past as it once was, but not for the future as it should be; and it has done that for a constantly modernizing society that expected everything from the future and nothing from the past. This is an ironic gift, and it is ours now to unpack. Discontinuing the professional handling and advancement of history is not an option, yet continuing to teach how to do history, and not, how to learn from history, is also becoming a problem. The strains of positivism, scientism, and nationalism have eased; interdisciplinary traffic has grown; social, cultural, environmental, and global history are "in" – but history as a tool of foresight is still "out."
- 24 Never before has humankind known so much about its different pasts and the global history of the planet. Yet we still train our students to research the past as past and not as potential precedent. If history is bunk, humankind must cope with the massive problems of a globalizing industrial civilization without the help of history. But if the wisecrack is bunk and history is humankind's record of brilliant successes and catastrophic failures, as well as everything in-between, we are looking at a great untapped intellectual resource. Will the neo-Ciceronian precept "of *attempting* to develop generalized knowledge"[22] from history – Mazlish's well-tempered call for history as a tool of foresight – ever resound?

[\[PDF\]](#)

---

## Notes

[1] William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1989), 277. The book was conceived in 1974/5 and first published in 1977.

[2] Bruce Mazlish, ed., *The Railroad and the Space Program: An Exploration in Historical Analogy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), vii.

[3] Steven J. Dick, *Consequences of Exploration: Learning from History* (NASA, 2004 [cited 25 August 2012]); available from [NASA](#).

[4] In fact, a quick shift from reluctance to hostility has to be expected; see, for example, the snarling critique of "historical analogy" by David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 257.

[5] Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," *History and Theory* 6, no. 1 (1967): 57.

[6] See Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535* (Leipzig & Berlin: G. Reimer, 1824).

[7] Reinhart Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process," in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 36.

[8] Ranke, *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535*, v-vi. Later editions changed "bloß sagen" (only say) to "bloß zeigen" (only show); see Leopold von Ranke, *Geschichten der Romanischen und Germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514. Zur Kritik Neuerer Geschichtschreiber*, Leopold von Ranke's *Sämtliche Werke. Dritte Gesamtausgabe* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1885), vii.

[9] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Orator: Books 1-2. Rhetorical Treatises*, *Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1942), De Oratore,

book II, chapter 9, 36.

[10] Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur Politisch-Sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 9 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-1993). For a succinct introduction to Koselleck's historico-theoretical approach, see Reinhart Koselleck, "Einleitung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972). For an older, yet still instructive, comparative review, see Melvin Richter, "Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe," *History and Theory* 29, no. 1 (1990).

[11] Koselleck, "Einleitung," xv.

[12] Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae," 32.

[13] Reinhart Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont Neuzeitlich Bewegter Geschichte," in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik Geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979), 54. The translation as "philological event" in Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae." (2004) 35, does not fully capture the sense of "sprachgeschichtliches Ereignis" because it lacks the historical dimension of *sprachgeschichtlich*.

[14] Finding the significant quotes was difficult and tedious. Koselleck must have been delighted to hear in late 2004 about Google's plan to digitize all the books in the world. For a recent Google estimate of the number of books to be scanned, see Leonid Taycher, *Books of the World, Stand up and Be Counted! All 129,864,880 of You* (2010 [cited 25 August 2012]); available from <http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2010/08/books-of-world-stand-up-and-be-counted.html>.

[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [ebook] (eBooks@Adelaide, 2008 [cited 25 August 2012]); available from [ebooks](#).

[16] Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae," note 31, 280 f.

[17] Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont Neuzeitlich Bewegter Geschichte," 38. *Neuzeitlich bewegte Geschichte* is hard to translate and hardly captured by "modernized historical process" in Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae," 26. For Koselleck, the modern historical process is unprecedented and not the "modernized" version of an earlier process.

[18] Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae," 31.

[19] Joseph Maria von Radowicz (against Hegel): *Aus Geschichte lernt man eben nur Geschichte*, see Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: Über die Auflösung des Topos im Horizont Neuzeitlich Bewegter Geschichte," 49.

[20] *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916, interview with Charles N. Wheeler about Ford's opposition against a military involvement of the US in WWI: "I don't know whether Napoleon did or did not try to get across there (to England) and I don't care. I don't know much about history, and I wouldn't give a nickel for all the history in the world. It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today." See [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Henry\\_Ford](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Henry_Ford).

[21] See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[22] Mazlish, ed., *The Railroad and the Space Program*, xiv.