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“Hey! What’s the Big Idea?”
Ruminations on the Question of Scale
in Intellectual History

Martin Jay

STUDENTS OF RECENT TRENDS in historiography will likely hear in the familiar phrase in this essay’s title an echo of a widely discussed manifesto by the Harvard historian David Armitage titled “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*” (2012).¹ It made a spirited case for the revival of a long-range history of ideas traversing centuries, even millennia. Those more conversant with the history of American popular culture may, however, find in the inclusion of the interjection preceding the question a reminder of something very different: the frequency with which it once voiced exasperation and annoyance in response to a provocation, real or imagined. “Hey! What’s the big idea?” was, in fact, an incessantly uttered catchphrase employed in precisely this way during the first half of the last century by, among others, the cartoon character Donald Duck, the real comedian Bert Lahr, and the Three Stooges, who hovered halfway between cartoon and reality.² It is useful to recall the way they all employed the little “hey!” before addressing the question that followed it to register the fact that there has often seemed something obnoxious about the very concept of a “big idea,” a trace of pretension and arrogance that has worked to annoy more than enlighten those on whom it is foisted.

Attempts to trace the fate of “big ideas” over long periods of time by intellectual historians have often been met with a collective “hey!” expressing the skeptical dismay of their colleagues. Suspicion has been generated not only when the idea is itself overly abstract and general, but also when attempts are made to fashion a coherent narrative of its history over many centuries, that *longue durée* which so entranced Fernand Braudel and his colleagues in the *Annales* school back in the mid-twentieth century.³ The reaction to the first danger was already voiced in 1900 by Georg Simmel in his explanation of what he called “the tragedy of human concept formation” in *The Philosophy of Money*, a tragedy that “lies in the fact that the higher concept, which through its breadth embraces a growing number of details, must count upon

increasing loss of content. Money is the perfect practical counterpart of such a higher category, namely a form of being whose qualities are generality and lack of content; a form of being that endows these qualities with real power and whose relation to all the contrary qualities of the objects transacted and to their psychological constellations can be equally interpreted as service and domination.⁷⁴ Here the anxiety is that higher concepts—which at this point in our argument we can equate with “big ideas”—hover too far above the messiness of the lifeworld, with all its contrary impulses, nuanced ambiguities, and metaphoric displacements. The grander the idea, so Simmel noted, the less likely it is to attend to the qualitative distinctions of the particulars it commensurates. Like money, “a big idea” has the potential not only to provide a useful service, but also to dominate the concrete actions subsumed under its general rule. Reminiscent of the nominalist critique of real universals during the Middle Ages—although Simmel’s sociology stressed relationality and interaction, and eschewed methodological individualism—this skepticism about “big ideas” was as much philosophical as it was historical.

The second worry, often directed at the *Annales* school, was unleashed by the search for enduring structural regularities at the deep level of historical continuity. Their programmatic indifference to discrete events and the complexities of individual texts underwrote a search for general *mentalités* in the realm of culture, which many critics found too sweeping to do justice to the finer distinctions that make intellectual history more than an imprecise and impressionist account of “the *Geist*” of a particular “*Zeit*.” As Armitage himself concedes, “big history, in all of its guises, has been inhospitable to the questions of meaning and intention so central to intellectual history.”⁷⁵ In fact, insofar as it has relied on either biologicistic or economic explanations for longterm trends, it has minimized the role of ideas in history tout court.

Tellingly, resistance to the history of “big ideas” has come from defenders of both contextualist and textualist approaches to the field. The former stress the embeddedness of ideas in relevant matrices of generation, dissemination, and reception, the local and finite contexts that ground ideas that otherwise would float too freely in an imagined ethereal *Geist*. The history of ideas, they often argue, should become intellectual history—which implies, among other things, the history of actual intellectuals—in the sense that it deals with flesh and blood thinkers, whose social position, psychological makeup, and intended audiences need to be considered in any thick description of the ideas they generate, promulgate, or criticize. To be understood historically, knowledge has to be intertwined with power, ideas with the material vehicles of their propagation and transmission. Excessive prolepsis in

which a teleological narrative rides roughshod over the uniqueness of each local context, understood both spatially and temporally with its own set of problems and particular vocabulary, should be avoided.

For the textualists who have taken seriously the lessons of the “linguistic turn” in the humanities, close attention has been paid to the media in which ideas are generated and through which they are transmitted, acknowledging the refracting power of language.⁶ Texts have to be treated as unbounded sites of unresolved contestation rather than closed, organic “works” reflecting congealed authorial intention and expressing consistent and coherent ideas. They should be understood as nodal points in intertextual webs that transcend any one work, individual oeuvre, or univocal intention. Because of the rhetorical complexities of texts and their inevitable immersion in an ever-changing sea of other texts, it is problematic to isolate their conceptual core, hoping to shuck off their linguistic husks to reveal their substantive kernel,⁷ and make them amenable to essentializing synopsis and paraphrastic reduction.

Nonetheless, despite all of these reservations, intellectual historians of late, Armitage correctly observes, have increasingly been willing to employ what he calls a telescopic rather than microscopic gaze to produce “transtemporal” histories that range beyond the boundaries of period or epoch and follow ideas through many different local contexts. Among his examples are works by Charles Taylor, Jerrold Seigel, Darrin McMahon, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, Sophia Rosenfeld, Rainer Forst, James T. Kloppenberg, Andrew Fitzmaurice, Richard Bourke, and Armitage himself. He even contends comparable efforts can be found by Cambridge school intellectual historians known as fierce defenders of strong contextualization, such as Quentin Skinner, Richard Tuck, and J. G. A. Pocock.⁸

Also included on Armitage’s list is my own *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*. Published in 2005, this book was, in fact, not the first nor the last of my efforts to track “big ideas” over an extended period of time. *Marxism and Totality* (1984) followed “the adventures of a concept” called “totality” through the history of twentieth-century Western Marxism. *Downcast Eyes* (1993) traced the denigration of visual primacy or “ocularcentrism” by French intellectuals from Henri Bergson to Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Emmanuel Levinas. *The Virtues of Mendacity* (2010) examined attitudes toward lying in politics from Plato to Hannah Arendt, and in so doing discriminated among variations of the concept of “the political.” And *Reason after its Eclipse* (2016) followed the fortunes of rationality from the Greeks through the first generation of the Frankfurt school and Jürgen Habermas. Without

consciously intending it, my own inclination as an intellectual historian has almost always been to practice what Armitage preaches as a refreshing alternative to business as usual.

I do not want, however, to present a self-indulgent *apologia pro vita mea*, or even return to the issues raised by the method of synoptic content analysis and the virtues of paraphrastic reduction, which I've tried to explore elsewhere.⁹ Instead, I would like to ruminate on the possible reasons a tension has existed between the search for a history of big ideas over long periods of time and the inevitable "hey!" that it seems to induce in its skeptical critics. In so doing, I want to focus on three main issues: the nature of the beast whose longterm history is being tracked, understood variously as ideas, concepts, and metaphors; the relationship of "big ideas" to the various contexts in which they are more or less embedded; and the more general question of the passage from macro- and microlevels of narrative analysis, which applies to more than just intellectual history. In my conclusion, I will return to the larger implications of the interjection "hey!" so often prefacing the question "what's the big idea?"

Already in the classic and now much-maligned "history of ideas" tradition inaugurated almost a century ago by Arthur Lovejoy and his colleagues at the Johns Hopkins University, there was acute awareness that the idea of an "idea" was itself highly unstable. In fact, Lovejoy's protégé George Boas began his programmatic essay "What is the History of Ideas?" by acknowledging that "few words are as ambiguous as the word 'idea.' By latest count it had twenty-five meanings."¹⁰ Although one might consider this an advantage insofar as it creates a rich opportunity for exploring semantic play, in the same essay Boas explicitly disagreed: "It is clear that before one can write a history of an idea one must disentangle it from all the ambiguities that it has acquired in the course of time. One must expect to find it appearing in contexts that vary from age to age."¹¹

But, his critics quickly wondered, can one produce this disambiguation for the idea of "idea" itself? Boas, in fact, spared himself the effort in this particular essay, but when it came to contributing the entry on "Idea" to the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* a few years later, he made an attempt that was more inductive than deductive. Beginning by noting the etymology of the word in the Greek verbs for "to see" and "to know," he observed that "the notion that ideas can be apprehended by a kind of vision or intuition, by looking and seeing them, has never been lost in Occidental philosophy, for knowing as a kind of insight, illumination, revelation, has almost always been retained."¹² But significantly, after tracing its fortunes based on the assumption that it could be understood as

identical from Plato to the neo-Kantians, he then ruefully acknowledged in conclusion that Hans Vaihinger, the late nineteenth-century neo-Kantian philosopher of “as if,” had used the word in a totally different way. For Vaihinger, “ideas” were fictions that orient humans in the world and not “guideposts to impersonal truth, completely detached from human desires, forming the matrix of reality.” Boas could only finish his essay by throwing up his hands, lamenting that “seldom has the history of an idea manifested such a reversal of meaning.”¹³

By and large, the attempt by classical historians of ideas to bring order into the semantic chaos they encountered was only rarely successful. Implicitly rejecting the identification of ideas with visually clear objects of conscious mental intuition and scorning coherent systems or “isms” with all their vagueness and complexity, Lovejoy turned his attention to what he called “unit-ideas.” These were more basic building blocks of thought, which lurked beneath the visible surface as “implicit or incompletely explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits*, operating in the thought of an individual or generation.”¹⁴ His greatest example was “the great chain of Being,” whose fortunes he traced with formidable erudition from Plato to the Romantics. Unlike Boas, who asserted that there was little profit in probing unconscious motivations because “ideas, after all, exist on the conscious level and their history has to stay on that level,”¹⁵ Lovejoy fully acknowledged the affective power of what he dubbed “metaphysical pathos,” or the ability of ideas, “like the words of a poem, [to] awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his reader.”¹⁶ The most telling example was the “metaphysical pathos of obscurity,” which enhanced the reception of certain philosophies—Lovejoy singled out those of Schelling, Hegel, and Bergson—by imbuing them with a mysterious pseudoprofundity that resisted straightforward clarification and easy paraphrase.

Even on the basis of these sketchy and inadequate remarks, we can see that the classical history of ideas was itself conflicted about the meaning of the immaterial object whose history it sought to trace. It acknowledged the connotative as well as denotative dimension of ideas, admitted their often unconscious affective valence, and recognized their frequent imbrication with images and metaphors. Lovejoy and his colleagues also conceded that in addition to their cognitive function, ideas could have rhetorical force and win over—or alienate—potential adherents by more than their logical cogency. Ideas, moreover, could manifest themselves outside of their primary textual form, as shown by the variety of different landscape garden styles, often identified with specific national characters, whose deeper meanings were noted by Lovejoy.¹⁷

But even with all of these qualifications, the main impulse behind the Lovejoyan approach was to isolate manifest ideas or latent unit-ideas from their social, psychological, and material contexts of origin and reception, and seek to capture their core meaning, a meaning that endured over time despite the vicissitudes of the ideas' development. Their integral unity was captured in the metaphor Lovejoy often used to describe that development as a "life-history."¹⁸ Although they could also form new combinations with other unit-ideas—one commentator compared them to "randy chemical elements in an unstable soup"¹⁹—they somehow remained coherent with their integrity intact over large periods of time. Thus, despite some recent suggestions that classical history of ideas might be due for a renewal,²⁰ Armitage is adamant that the "big ideas" whose *longue durée* he wants us to trace are something very different. "No intellectual historian," he writes, "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 lifecycle longer than that of any mortal human subject."²¹

A more promising approach, now enjoying considerable popularity, was promoted by the so-called "conceptual history" (*Begriffsgeschichte*) launched in Germany by Erich Rothacker, Otto Brunner, and most notably Reinhart Koselleck in the 1960s.²² Arguing for the "desubstantialization" of concepts, they took to heart Nietzsche's celebrated warning that "only that which has no history is definable"²³ and Wittgenstein's insight—anticipated in the definitional practices of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in the nineteenth century—that the meaning(s) of a word can be found in its various uses over time. The Cartesian preference for "clear and distinct" ideas in the mind was not only problematic philosophically but, *pace* Boas, also a misleading model for intellectual history. Concepts, in fact, could be contrasted with commonplace words precisely in terms of their resistance to essentializing definitions. As Koselleck put it, "a concept must remain ambiguous in order to be a concept. The concept is connected" ("bound" is the way it is translated in the English version) "to a word, but is at the same time more than a word. . . . A word presents potentialities for meaning; a concept unites within itself a plenitude of meaning. Hence, a concept can possess clarity, but must be ambiguous."²⁴ Even when neologisms are consciously minted with one intended meaning, they have the capacity to escape the intentions of their coiners and accrue different, even contradictory meanings over time. Thus it is wrong to assume the priority of etymology in which the alleged original meaning, often in a classical language such as Greek or Latin, is privileged over its later "dilutions" or "corruptions." Nor is it

correct to understand the meaning of a concept teleologically in which current meanings are the “right” ones and earlier ones are considered more or less prescient precursors.

A history of concepts is thus inherently “big” in the sense that it involves a class of richly polysemic terms that have accumulated a welter of disparate meanings, which were often very different from their current acceptations. Rather than assuming simple iterability over time, in which recurrent motifs transcend individual contexts, such a history urges us to follow the musical model of themes and developing variations, without, of course, necessarily adopting the practice of tonal recapitulation fundamental to classical Western music. But insofar as all of those developing meanings can still be clustered under the umbrella of the concept—or “grasped” by it, as the etymology of the German *Begriff* in the verb *begreifen* suggests²⁵—there is at least some rough commensurability that ties them together. Although not based on the policing of lexical boundaries via normative definitions, concepts appear to operate through the logic of subsumption or at least the seeking of a common denominator underlying different usages.

An alternative method called “metaphorology,” developed in the shadow of *Begriffsgeschichte* by Hans Blumenberg, argued for a more analogical or paradigmatic approach in which figurative language resists translation into conceptual abstractions.²⁶ Although Blumenberg shared the conceptual historian’s resistance to essentializing definitions, he focused on the role of what he called the “non-conceptual,” including myths, anecdotes, and rhetorical tropes, as recurring figures worthy of the historian’s attention.²⁷ “Absolute metaphors,” he argued, were foundational and irreducible elements of even the most austere philosophical discourse and ought not to be seen as merely inchoate anticipations of clear and distinct concepts. Although conceptual history should not be replaced wholesale by metaphorology, it could be supplemented by it in valuable ways. Thus, for example, the history of “light as a metaphor of truth,”²⁸ one of Blumenberg’s earliest metaphorological exercises, revealed the recurrent and often hidden image underpinning a fundamental concept of Western thought.²⁹ It was what we might call a “big metaphor,” which persisted over many centuries and was operative in many different cultures. It was, as we’ve noted, still evident in Boas’s definition of “idea” in the mid-twentieth century.

The power of Blumenberg’s approach was evident in an audacious essay he wrote in 1976 on Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money*, which revisited the remarks I cited above about the tragedy of the concept.³⁰ Understanding money in Simmel not as the antonym of “life” but rather as a metaphor for it, Blumenberg argued that both reveal an immanent and

unending dynamic between “rigidification and liquidity, form and dissolution, hoarding and squandering, institution and freedom, levelling out and individuality.”³¹ The key to their analogical status lay in their shared enactment of the dialectic of subjectification and objectification. That is, money, by providing a neutral, objective medium available for subjective choices about how it will be spent, choices expressing the desires and values of the spender, is like formally unconstrained “life” in its opening up of a range of undetermined possibilities. Despite its apparent enabling of the quantifiable commensuration of human relations, it is therefore ultimately in the service of human freedom. Rather than a principle of conservation, in which exchange creates nothing new, it allows the pursuit of subjective happiness on the basis of individual values.

Blumenberg’s arresting reading of *The Philosophy of Money* cannot be adequately addressed here, but by alerting us to the unexpected analogy between money and life in Simmel he forces us also to reconsider the nature of the other analogical relationship posited by the German sociologist between the concept and money as its “practical counterpart.” That is, the comparison enables us to appreciate that in addition to the subsumptive, commensurating, abstracting force of conceptualization, there is also a potential for free play in the ways in which concepts dialectically interact with what exceeds them. Or to put it in Simmel’s terms, the role played by big ideas in relation to the particulars they subsume “can be equally interpreted as service and domination.” They can accommodate both unity and diversity rather than making us chose one over the other.³²

Conceptual history and metaphorology thus avoid some of the vulnerable assumptions of traditional history of ideas, which seeks to still semantic ambiguity. Additional assistance comes from the insight, shared by, among others, the Cambridge school contextualists, that no concept or metaphor ever exists in a vacuum, isolated from the dynamic force field of counter-concepts and competing, or at least alternative, metaphors in which it is situated at particular moments in its history. The symbolic import of a metaphor can alter in relation to its positioning in a constellation of other metaphors, and synonyms can, in fact, even turn into antonyms. No history of the concept of “community,” for example, can ignore how it came to be pitted against “society” in sociological discourse from at least the time of Ferdinand Tönnies, nor could a comparable account of the fortunes of “culture” fail to understand its tense relationship with “civilization,” at least in German thought from the eighteenth century on, as well as with “nature.” Words that once expressed contrary ideas can coalesce into a new composite package. For example “liberal” and “democrat,” which were at odds in the nineteenth century, now

happily cohabit in the familiar formula “liberal democracy.” Although using the same word, different discourses can employ terms of art to mean very different things; think, for example, of “rationalization” in the vocabularies of Max Weber and Sigmund Freud.

Some words that seem to have a single meaning reveal their latent tensions when it is registered that they translate into a number of different words in other languages, a salient example being the way in which the English “experience” can be rendered by the contrasting German terms *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.³³ Conversely, some words seem to gain richness of meaning when they embrace distinct terms that another language keeps apart; for example, *Geist* as both “spirit” and “mind” in English or *Seele* as both “soul” and “psyche.” It is even possible, *mirabile dictu*, for the same word to be pitted against itself in languages where gendered articles matter, as can be observed in the distinction recent French theorists make between “le politique” and “la politique,”³⁴ the former implying an ontological version of politics and the latter a more empirical version. Nor can a powerful metaphor like “ground,” which has done so much work in philosophical discourse, be understood without seeing its relationship to “foundation,” “soil,” “bottom,” or “earth,” all of which can serve as metaphors carrying heavy loads of alternative connotations.³⁵

When Cambridge school intellectual historians such as Pocock talk of the “languages” of political theory—also variously called “vocabularies,” “rhetorics,” or “idioms”—they alert us to the ways in which ideas truly become “big” only when they are embedded in ever-shifting discursive fields that imbue them with special meanings and rhetorical force.³⁶ As Skinner has noted in his critique of Raymond Williams’s lexicon of “keywords,” one must take into account “the strongly holistic implications of the fact that, when a word changes its meaning, it also changes its relationship to an entire vocabulary.”³⁷ Without the need to be card-carrying Hegelians, historians of ideas can be sensitive to the negations, contradictions, and sublations that make those discourses dynamic constellations of meaning, which coalesce and fragment over time. Indeed, one of the ways in which an idea can be accounted “big,” or a simple term earn the honorific title of “keyword,” is precisely its survival in new semantic contexts, in which it often also carries the traces of sedimented meanings, some more manifest than others, from its placement in previous constellations.

Situating ideas or concepts in their discursive contexts opens the larger question of how other contexts—institutional, biographical, political, social—need to be taken into account in writing the history of big ideas. Armitage addresses it by arguing that instead of treating

ideas as the heroic, self-contained protagonists of a traditional historical narrative, it would be better to attempt a “history *in* ideas” based on “serial contextualism,” understanding ideas as “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.”³⁸ This approach would allow us to take on board the crucial speech act distinction developed by John Austin and John Searle and stressed by Cambridge school contextualists between a term’s locutionary and illocutionary, or constative and performative, dimensions, the latter often dependent on the work its users intend to do in respect to specific audiences (or the unintended consequences they provoke).³⁹

Being sensitive to this distinction may, however, prevent us from the wholesale adoption of one tool of the current turn toward “big ideas,” which is touted by Armitage: drawing on an “N-gram” model to measure the progress (or regress) of an idea or keyword over time based on the statistical findings allowed by database searching of massive numbers of texts over long periods. The value of such tools for the nascent field of digital humanities, to be sure, should not be dismissed out of hand. In their tracking of the varying frequency of words, phrases, tropes and the like, they provide suggestive information about large-scale patterns of usage, allowing us to gauge the waxing or waning popularity of terms and compare them with others in their semantic field. Based on what the literary critic Franco Moretti has puckishly called “distant reading,” they can relieve the intellectual historian of the need to focus on the complexities of allegedly representative texts—whose canonical aura may be more a function of posterior than current judgment—by mapping or graphing the larger patterns of which they are a part.⁴⁰ Such a “macroanalysis” of ideas, concepts, metaphors, tropes, genres, styles, or whatever else is amenable to statistical retrieval can help expand the purview of humanist study beyond the usual suspects.⁴¹ It can also, if Moretti and his fellow digital enthusiasts are right, suggest structural explanations of unintended trends, disseminations, and differentiations (or in his vocabulary, “morphological trees” revealing evolutionary survival and extinction) rather than depend on hermeneutic interpretations of meaning, intended or otherwise, in individual texts.

It cannot, however, register the often latent metaphoric play in concepts that Blumenberg stressed, which helps to undermine their substantialization. Nor can it turn the specific, local use of an idea, concept, or metaphor into a mere example of a larger, secular trend, which is amenable to structural explanation from, as it were, the outside. That is, there is no easy passage from micro- to macroanalysis, especially when the former requires hermeneutic tools and sensitivity to illocutionary

contexts, which are factored out by the latter. Intellectual historians, to be sure, rarely emulate the close readings of literary critics, who are more rigorously trained in the formalist techniques of the new criticism and narratology. But some have followed Dominick LaCapra's exhortation to regard texts as "worklike" in their dialogic solicitation of new meanings rather than as transparent "documents" revealing intended old ones,⁴² and in so doing to avoid reducing them to mere instances of a large-scale pattern revealed in a databank. They have also adopted a self-consciously discordant focal practice, moving from what film critics call "establishing shots" to "close-ups," a metaphor already suggested by Siegfried Kracauer in his still very useful rumination on the parallels between making films and writing history in *History: The Last Things Before the Last*.⁴³ They have understood the need to oscillate between scales of analysis, relying on whatever gauge tools are most appropriate for the questions they pose.

Why then, we might wonder in conclusion, might it be still be prudent to acknowledge the uneasy and indignant "hey!" that so often prefaces the question "what's the big idea?" Among its many possible justifications, let me single out two that may make us pause before unequivocally welcoming the return of long-range, large-scale intellectual history, even with the refinements suggested above. Whereas Braudel may be the muse inspiring Armitage's enthusiasm for the *longue durée*, it is Foucault who helps us to see the limitations in its adoption. Much has been written about Foucault's idiosyncratic approach to history—some indeed have even questioned if he was really doing history at all—and the differences in his own "archaeological" and "genealogical" methods.⁴⁴ But when it came to mainstream history of ideas, it is at least clear that he had trenchant reservations. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he dismissively characterized it as "an uncertain object, with badly drawn frontiers, methods borrowed from here and there, and an approach lacking in rigour and stability. . . . the discipline of beginnings and ends, the description of obscure continuities and returns, the reconstitution of developments in the linear form of history."⁴⁵

Foucault's archaeological alternative, to be sure, may not have itself been fully convincing. Few historians, after all, have honored his call to shift their attention entirely from ideas, representations, thoughts, and images to the rule-bound discursive practices subtending them. Nor have they shared his disdain for authors and their *oeuvres*, and his rejection of interpretation and the search for meaning in favor of the enunciative function of "statements." But what has been called the "nominalist" impulse in his historical writing has produced two caveats worth taking seriously.⁴⁶ Stressing dispersion rather than unity and contingency rather

than necessity, he raised justifiable doubts about the coherence of long-range narratives, which smoothed over ruptures and discontinuities in favor of “genesis, continuity, totalization.”⁴⁷ Any history of “big ideas,” he warned, has to be sensitive to the ways in which the apparent persistence of an idea or concept or metaphor doesn’t necessarily betoken survival—or even development—of essential meaning or function. As Boas acknowledged with chagrin in the case of Hans Vaihinger, reversals of meaning may occur in ways that undermine the long-range narrative being fashioned by historians who are blind to the frequency of rupture in the discursive force field in which the seemingly same term may be located. Even the conceptual historians’ Nietzschean wariness about definitional mortification may not do justice to the radical breaks that undercut any meaningful continuity. Metanarratives of coherent development or evolution are no less hazardous in intellectual history than they are in other variants of historical storytelling.

No less important is the second lesson bequeathed by Foucault, who shared with a number of other recent French thinkers a great deal of interest in singular “events” as unexpected and disruptive incursions in a developmental pattern or emplotted narrative.⁴⁸ The always vexed issue of innovation—the new idea that emerges without being fully prepared in advance by a context, even one that becomes apparent after the fact—cannot be easily resolved. Rather than focusing on what is objectively possible in any situation, following an infinite regress of influences, it is sometimes more productive to wonder at the realization of what seemed virtually impossible at the time and cannot be reduced, even in retrospect, to the conditions that prepared it.

Conceptual historians have, to be sure, sometimes acknowledged the sudden emergence of what Koselleck called “concepts of the future,” which do not reflect the context of their genesis but rather seed the ground for a potential practical realization at a time to come.⁴⁹ As a result, one commentator has even been able to compare Koselleck’s work with that of Foucault’s, because of their shared interest in “the rupture of conceptual meaning, the transformations that takes place in intention when a term is uttered in different contexts, and the different conceptual content of given terms across time.”⁵⁰ But ironically, it is precisely because *Begriffsgeschichte* rarely arouses the indignation generated by the “history of ideas” that one of its limits is revealed. For the “hey!” so often preceding queries about big ideas may well signal an element of shock and surprise at the interruption of a settled way of thinking stimulated only by what we call “ideas.” Indeed, at times the very word can performatively solicit that outcome, which is absent in our response to what seems in so many other ways to be its synonym, the

word “concept.” No one, after all, ever says “Hey! What’s the big concept?” Despite all of its baggage, it may well therefore be worth sticking to the old notion of a “history of ideas,” if at the same time we remain sensitive to the justifiable “hey!” that it so often arouses. Only then will we fully appreciate that the biggest ideas are the ones that can trouble our complacency, transcend our parochial horizons, and astonish us with the audacity of their insolent ambition.

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NOTES

- 1 David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*,” *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (2012): 493–507. He later extended his argument in a book coauthored with Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), which generated a lively controversy. The fiercest attack was made by Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, “*The History Manifesto*: A Critique,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (2015): 530–42, followed by a reply by Armitage and Guldi. Cohen and Mandler did not criticize the value of a *longue durée* history of ideas as much as the claim that it had fallen out of favor since the 1970s with nefarious political consequences.
- 2 There is even a compilation of dozens of uses of the phrase by the Three Stooges that can be enjoyed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TV1tbKtboaw>.
- 3 The seminal text of 1958 is Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The *Longue Durée*,” in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (New York: The New Press, 1995), 115–146.
- 4 George Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (Boston: Routledge and Kegan & Paul, 1978), 221. It should not be confused with his more influential idea of the “tragedy of culture.”
- 5 Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea?” 494.
- 6 For my own attempts to grapple with its implications, see Martin Jay, “Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate,” in *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and “The Textual Approach to Intellectual History,” in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 7 This metaphor has often been used by theological fundamentalists who want to jettison the cultural and historical accretions to original doctrine, for example Adolf von Harnack and Edwin Abbott Abbott.
- 8 For the specific examples he cites, see Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea?” 499.
- 9 Jay, “Two Cheers for Paraphrase: The Confessions of a Synoptic Intellectual Historian,” in *Fin-de-Siècle Socialism*.
- 10 George Boas, *The History of Ideas: An Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 3.
- 11 Boas, *The History of Ideas*, 22.
- 12 Boas, “Idea,” in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Scribner, 1973), 2:542.
- 13 Boas, “Idea,” 2:548.
- 14 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 7. In his 1938 essay “The Historiography of Ideas,” he provides a heteroclit list of possible candidates: “types of categories, thoughts concerning particular aspects of common experience, implicit or explicit presuppositions, sacred formulas and

catchwords, specific philosophical theorems, or the larger hypotheses, generalizations or methodological assumptions of various sciences." Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Putnam, 1960), 9.

15 Boas, *The History of Ideas*, 19. He later adds that the historian of ideas need not concern himself with the question of an author's sincere belief in ideas, although a biographer might.

16 Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 11.

17 See, for example, Lovejoy's discussion of the influence of Chinese gardens on British Romanticism in "The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism," in *Essays in the History of Ideas*.

18 See, for example, Lovejoy, "The Historiography of Ideas," 9.

19 Kenneth Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Oxford: Polity, 1988), 186.

20 See, for example, Darrin M. McMahon, "The Return of the History of Ideas?" in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

21 Armitage, "What's the Big Idea?" 497.

22 For one account, see Jan-Werner Müller, "On Conceptual History," in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*. Their most impressive achievement was Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–1997). Launched in 2005, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* is the leading forum for its development in the English-speaking world.

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), 80. Nietzsche's critique of definition in philosophy has also been endorsed by others, for example Theodor W. Adorno in, among other places, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 1:13

24 Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 85.

25 The English word "concept" is derived from the past participle of the Latin "conci-pere," which means "to take in." Although caution is warranted against assigning semantic priority to such origins, acknowledging them sometimes provides useful reminders of sedimented meanings.

26 Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2010).

27 For a comparison with Adorno's advocacy of the "nonconceptual," see Jay, "Adorno and Blumenberg: Nonconceptuality and the *Bilderverbot*," in *The Blackwell Companion to Adorno*, ed. Espen Hammer, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky (forthcoming).

28 Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," trans. Joel Anderson, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993).

29 In *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, Blumenberg probed other salient metaphors associated with truth, including "mighty" truth and "naked" truth, as well as the "tribunal" of judging the truth.

30 Blumenberg, "Money or Life: Metaphors of Georg Simmel's Philosophy," *Theory, Culture and Society* 29, no. 7/8 (2012): 249–62.

31 Blumenberg, "Money or Life," 251.

32 For an example of this insight, see Jürgen Habermas, "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices," in *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

- 33 For a discussion of this distinction, which itself was not always stable in meaning, see Jay, *Songs of Experience*.
- 34 For an early use of the distinction, see Paul Ricoeur, "Le paradoxe politique," *Esprit* 250, no. 5 (1957). For later examples, see Jay, *The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2010), 205.
- 35 See Blumenberg, "Foundation and Soil, Bottom and Ground: Hitting Bottom, Getting to the Bottom of Things, Standing on the Ground," in *Care Crosses the River*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010).
- 36 J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009).
- 37 Quentin Skinner, "Language and Social Change," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 124.
- 38 Armitage, "What's the Big Idea?" 499.
- 39 For a discussion of the use of speech act theory by Skinner and his followers, see Jason David BeDuhn, "The Historical Assessment of Speech Acts: Clarifications of Austin and Skinner for the Study of Religions," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 14, no. 1 (2002): 84–113.
- 40 Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013). See also his *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007). For a trenchant critique, see Christopher Prendergast, "Evolution and Literary History: A Response to Franco Moretti," *New Left Review* 34 (July–August, 2005). Moretti responds in *Distant Reading*. See also Tom Eyers, "The Perils of the 'Digital Humanities': New Positivism and the Fate of Literary Theory," *Postmodern Culture* 22, no. 3 (2013).
- 41 Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Champaign-Urbana, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2013).
- 42 Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982). The documentary approach to texts sees them as referential media revealing the world, while the "worklike" treats them as complexly indeterminate stimuli to a dialogic encounter that potentially challenges the present and opens the possibility of transforming the status quo.
- 43 Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things Before the Last* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), "The Structure of the Historical Universe." For a similar argument, see Jean Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant: Essai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), on which I drew in *Downcast Eyes*, 19–20.
- 44 Good places to start are Jan Ellen Goldstein, ed., *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), and Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 45 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge And the Discourse of Language*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 1972), 136–137.
- 46 Foucault's historical nominalism was perhaps first identified in John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985). It meant both an antisubstantialist suspicion of eternal ideas and concepts, which echoed the medieval nominalists' critique of real universals, and a distrust of coherent metanarratives.
- 47 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 138.
- 48 For my attempts to explore this issue, see Jay, "Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization," *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011); and "Historicism and the Event," in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman, and Richard I. Cohen (New York: Berghahn, 2014).
- 49 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 78.
- 50 Jason Edward, "The Ideological Interpellation of Individuals as Combatants: An Encounter between Reinhart Koselleck and Michel Foucault," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 54.