Helge Jordheim (Oslo/ New York):

How long does an idea last? Ideas for a stratigraphic model for intellectual history

Academic disciplines always come with their own temporal frameworks, which to a large extent decide what can be studied within the remits of that particular scholarly and even scientific venture, and what cannot.¹ Even within singular disciplines there are often a number of competing times, temporal patterns, rhythms and durations, which help to select, contextualize, and even explain, the objects of study at hand. Rivalry between disciplines, sub-disciplines, traditions, or theories often comes down to conflicts about the temporal contexts or patterns applied to a specific object, for example the relative importance of past, present and future in the interpretation or explanation of a phenomenon. Aspects of such a rivalry can be observed between the broad, expanding field of intellectual history, as well as for its predecessor, the history of ideas. No one would doubt that specific and various temporal structures constitute a seminal part of the theoretical framework for practicing intellectual history: in terms of chronologies, on the one hand, and in terms of temporal processes which govern history and historical narration, on the other. A much harder task, however, is to map the ways in which these various temporal structures actually influence the forms of historical analysis performed within the discipline, or disciplines.

In this essay, I set off from a presumption that many of the theoretical and methodological debates which have been dominating the field of what we – loosely and without large claims to epistemological or sociological precision – could call “intellectual history” are really debates about how to deal with time in history. Time should here be understood both in a chronological sense, referring to the succession of years, decades, even centuries, as well as to precise historical dates, which are evoked in the study of human thought and language, and in a phenomenological sense, as the organization of temporal experiences

¹ See for example Andrew Abbott, *Time Matters. On Theory and Method*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2001.

according to specific patterns and figures, such as periodizations, narratives of progress or decline, growth and extinction, as well as speeds and rhythms, continuities and breaks.²

In order to launch a meaningful discussion about the temporalities inherent in intellectual history I will map out three different positions or traditions, associated with specific authors, works, and even moments, in order to discuss what kind of temporal scales and structures they unfold or adhere to, and what are their implications for the choice of objects and methods of study. In the second part of my argument, I will explore how these three positions might fit into a model for practicing intellectual history, which I will tentatively refer to as “stratigraphic”. Developed in the 17th century within the nascent sciences of mineralogy and geology, “stratigraphy” gave the theoretical framework for understanding how mountains and landscapes were made up by layers of rocks, the oldest at the bottom the youngest at the top.³ In the 20th century this multi-layered model was reintroduced into the human sciences by historians such as Fernand Braudel and Reinhart Koselleck, and not least, the Polish historian and philosopher Krzysztof Pomian, who in 1984 launched the theory of a “stratigraphy of time and of history”.⁴ Towards the end of this essay I will, in a rather tentative way, make some suggestions for what I consider a possible “stratigraphy” for intellectual history.

The Continuity of Ideas: Lovejoy and the History of Ideas

The first of these positions, diachronically speaking, the first of these moments is strongly associated with a specific scholarly, even disciplinary label, which has also become a generic name: “history of ideas”. Of course, the label, which in addition to the theoretical and methodological approach, “history”, also specifically mentions the object of study, “ideas”, remains associated with the work of the American philosopher Arthur O. Lovejoy. This scholarly enterprise was initiated by Lovejoy between the two World Wars in a number of essays, and not least in the book *The Great Chain of Being*, which won him fame beyond his own university, Johns Hopkins, and beyond the border of his discipline, philosophy. In 1940 the “history of ideas” was institutionalized in the journal with the same name. As part of the expansion of

² Cf. Helge Jordheim, «Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization», *History & Theory* 53/4 (2014), 498–518.

³ *Ibid.*, 506-507.

⁴ Krzysztof Pomian, *L'ordre du temps*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984, 334-35.

higher education, and especially of the humanities, in the post-war era, , it also became the label for a discipline at some universities, especially in Scandinavia.⁵ As Anthony Grafton points out in his essay celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, this interdisciplinary enterprise, presenting “a rich mix of technical articles and wide-ranging essays”,⁶ was originally met by great enthusiasm both among students and scholars. However, in his discussion of the history of the journal for the period 1950-2000, Grafton agrees with Robert Darnton’s observation that “for the last ten years [...] younger scholars, especially graduate students, [have] been scrambling over the gunwales of the good ship History of Ideas”.⁷

Independent of the assessment of the current state of affairs in the History of Ideas, its “precept” and “practice”, to use Grafton terms, it is possible to probe the intellectual content of the label itself, beyond the nominalist claim that it is a purely conventional and thus contingent name for a rather diverse bundle of scholarly interests, differing significantly from one national academic context to another. To the extent that this disciplinary label has real intellectual content, beyond mere pragmatic and contextual fence-ins and fence-offs, it consists in an argument about time and duration, continuity and permanence. And even though “history” is the likely culprit for imposing a specific form of temporality on the enterprise, processual, based on ideas of causality, change and openness to the future,⁸ the focus here will be on the specific temporal structure, the kind of duration manifested and projected by the “idea”, which Lovejoy abstracted from textual and visual material and insisted should be the chosen object of study for this discipline.

⁵ All three Scandinavian countries have strong and long-standing academic traditions in what in Danish and Norwegian is called *idehistorie*, “history of ideas”, in Swedish *ide- och lärdoms historia*, “history of ideas and knowledge”. At several Scandinavian universities, these are the names of full-fledged academic disciplines, offering undergraduate and graduate courses, as well as jobs for junior and senior scholars. Every now and again the title of the disciplines are called into question and replacements are suggested, “intellectual” and “cultural history” figuring prominently among the alternatives. But the old title and hence, the idea of the “idea” as the unit of investigation, have stuck. When a new Nordic journal was founded in 2006, the same name was used, in two different permutations: *Ideas in History. Journal of the Nordic Society of the History of Ideas*.

⁶ Anthony Grafton, “The History of Ideas: Precept and Practice, 1950-2000 and Beyond”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67/1 (2006), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3

⁸ Cf. Odilo Engels, Horst Günther, Reinhart Koselleck, Christian Meier, “Geschichte, Historie”, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historische Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Vol 2. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1975, 647-677.

For Lovejoy, the idea served many different purposes, anchoring his scholarly enterprise both in the natural sciences, in terms of a “unit-idea” and in the philosophical tradition, from which he emerged. Looking back at the history of the discipline, however, the main intellectual role of the idea has been to invest history with duration, continuity, and to a certain extent permanence. One way to present the *raison d’être* of the history of ideas would be as an enterprise to trace and establish continuities across long time-spans, preferably the entire two millennia of so-called “Western culture or civilization”, for instance by tracing the ideas of democracy, citizenship, and political participation back to the Ancient Greeks. In the words of one of Lovejoy’s sharpest critics, the Romanist and philologist Leo Spitzer, history of ideas operates “by inorganically detaching certain features of the whole of Romanticism in order to draw lines of continuity with our times”.⁹ In other words, the abstraction, and thus, the construction of a limited set of ideas – or in the words of Arnaldo Momigliano, a “number of Urideas”¹⁰ – puts into practice the dream of kind of structural continuity across several centuries.

At the beginning of his famous book *The Great Chain of Being*, first published in 1936, Lovejoy refers to the title idea as “one of the half-dozen most potent and persistent presuppositions in Western thought”.¹¹ His name for this and other similar figures of continuity and permanence was “unit-ideas”,¹² which later have become a center of gravity for discussions inside and outside the discipline. According to the preface to *Essays in the History of Ideas*, Lovejoy’s ambition was to study “the presence and influence of the same presuppositions or other ‘operative’ ideas in very different provinces of thought and in very different periods”. His example, his “unit-idea” of choice in this preface, is “the underlying idea-complex, summed up in the word ‘nature’”. According to Lovejoy, this idea possesses a “fundamental identity”, which can be traced from Tertullian in the third century B.C. to the eighteenth century, “not annulled by the dissimilarities of the concomitant ideas with which it was associated nor with the

⁹ Leo Spitzer, “*Geistesgeschichte* vs. History of Ideas as Applied to Hitlerism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 5 (1944), 203. The response from Lovejoy was published in the same issue, 204-19.

¹⁰ Arnaldo Momigliano, “A Piedmontese View of the History of Ideas”, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, Oxford: OUP, 1977, 6

¹¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*. The Study of the History of An Idea, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1936, vii.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

different preoccupations and the temperamental biases of the writers into whose thinking it entered". Thus, in the case of nature, we have to do with "one of the major and persistent ideas of Western thought, which, since the fourth century B.C. has rarely disappeared altogether".¹³ Similar things can be said about "primitivism" and "the great chain of being", other of Lovejoy's "ideas", which can be studied historically. The task of history of ideas, according to Lovejoy, is "the study of the (so far as possible) total life-history of individual ideas, in which the many parts that any one of them plays upon the historic scene, the different facets which it exhibits, its interplay, conflicts and alliances with other ideas, and the diverse human reactions to it, are traced out".¹⁴ And such a life-history stretches out in time, for around two thousand years, from Antiquity to modernity, in some cases to Lovejoy's own present.

In other words, Lovejoy is quite aware that what distinguishes his "unit-ideas" from other possible objects of analysis, both works and texts, on one hand, and ideologies and systems of thought, on the other, are their duration, or more precisely, their permanence. Systems of thought can be "original and distinctive", distinguished by their "seeming novelty", but this is "due solely to the application and arrangement of the old elements which enter into it".¹⁵ It is these elements and the fact that they are "old", in contrast to the novelty to their arrangement and application, which interests Lovejoy and which he calls "unit-ideas". As Maurice Mandelbaum has pointed out, Lovejoy's primary concern was "*the continuities of elements*", not, as in the case of Ernst Cassirer, "the formative influence that helped determine the patterns into which these elements fitted".¹⁶ And he adds that "this stress on continuity [...] rather than what was novel in it as a whole was characteristic of Lovejoy's earlier essay on the history of philosophy".¹⁷ The fundamental assumption – and indeed, the fundamental problem, according to Mandelbaum – is that the unit-ideas are "assumed to have continuous life-histories of their own".¹⁸

¹³ Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1948, xiv.

¹⁴ Lovejoy, *Essays*, 532.

¹⁵ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain*, 3-4.

¹⁶ Maurice Mandelbaum, "The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy", *History & Theory* 5, Beiheft 5 (1965), 37.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37 n. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

It is interesting to note how Mandelbaum's problems with Lovejoy's version of intellectual history are at least a part due to his way of dealing with time, with temporality. To "understand the occurrence of these unit-ideas in the thought of a particular person", Mandelbaum argues, "is always by tracing them backwards in time" and this procedure renders it hard or rather irrelevant to make the distinction between "continuing" and "recurrent ideas".¹⁹ Lovejoy, in Mandelbaum's opinion, is so bent on establishing long temporal continuities, moving backwards in time, that he completely ignores the existence of recurrent ideas, only accepting the continuing ones. This means that he obliges himself to establish "historical", more precisely "genetic connections", between every time an idea occurs in a text or is used by a historical person. And in this he fails more often than he succeeds, according to Mandelbaum, "most notably in such a case as that in which he suggested the continuity from Tertullian to the eighteenth century, or in the case in which he claimed that there probably was an historical influence of certain ideas held by philosophers and literary men in the 1780's and 1790's upon the formation of the state of mind which led to the appeal of totalitarian ideologies in the 1920's".²⁰

In Lovejoyean history, ideas are units which have a continuous existence across centuries. Between their different occurrences in particular and historically specific systems of thought, there are "historical" and "genetic connections", at least in theory, which can be traced backwards through time. If Lovejoy succeeds in establishing these connections, or if he mostly fails, as Mandelbaum will have it, is not the issue here. My point is rather to illustrate the specific role that temporality plays in these studies, as a means of establishing connections and indeed continuities between different and indeed in themselves seemingly unrelated historical texts and contexts. Indeed, the main formal characteristics of Lovejoy's "unit ideas" seem to be found in this specific form of temporality, a kind of duration spanning across the centuries of Western civilization.

The Discontinuity of Events and Actions: Foucault, Skinner and the Attack on the History of ideas

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 40.

In the last decades, intellectual historians working in different disciplines have taken the lead in the widespread, interdisciplinary search for breaks, moments of discontinuity, innovations etc. Among the most famous attacks on the illusions of continuity and permanence, haunting the history of ideas, are Quentin Skinner's «Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas», and Michel Foucault's *Archéologie du savoir*, both from 1969, which together make up the second theoretical moment to be discussed in this essay, as well as a second temporal layer in the stratigraphy of intellectual history. In his most theoretically explicit work, Foucault attacks the «predefined forms of continuity» at work in the kind of historical writing he somewhat fortuitously calls *histoire des idées*,²¹ whereas Skinner, on the other hand, systematically dismantles the «mythologies» involved in establishing influences, connections and continuities between different authors in the philosophical canon.²² Both their attacks on the history of ideas were aimed at replacing the naïve presupposition of permanence and continuity as the dominant figures of temporality with a different set of presupposition about the discontinuity of language, in the form of either enunciative events or speech acts.

In their 1969 interventions, both Foucault and Skinner attack something they refer to as “history of ideas”, *histoire des idées*. None of them, however, seems to be targeting a specific discipline or clearly defined field of knowledge. On the contrary, Foucault insists that to him *histoire des idées* is a generic label for a series of different disciplines, “so unsure about their borders, so imprecise in their contents”, including the history of “of the sciences, of philosophy, of thought, and also of literature”.²³ Skinner, on the other hand, emphasizes the “deliberate vagueness” of the term, referring to “as wide as possible a variety of historical inquiries into intellectual problem”.²⁴ Since none of them appears to believe that the term “history of ideas” has any precise content or reference, their choice of strawman must have another motivation. Why do both Foucault and Skinner use the term “idea” and “history of ideas” in order to target a way of doing history, which they are vehemently opposed to and want to expose, reject, and supplant with their own theoretical and methodological choices? In the case of Skinner, we

²¹ Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, 37.

²² Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History & Theory* 871969, 7.

²³ Foucault, *L'archéologie*, 32.

²⁴ Skinner, “Meaning”, 3, n. 1.

could presume that he more than anyone else wants to attack Lovejoy, and indeed, there are claims in this respect, both in this and later essays. But obviously his arguments go further. And in the French context, which Foucault is referring himself to, *histoire des idées* does not offer him a very specific target. In other words, it is possible to argue that the terms are chosen in order to identify as certain set of historiographical and interpretative practices rather than scholars, works, fields and disciplines. Or as Skinner puts it: “my aim has been to articulate some general arguments about the process of interpretation itself, and to draw from them a series of what I take to be methodological implications”.²⁵ In the same way Foucault uses the term “idea” to get at a specific form of “historical analysis”, whose major topics, he states, are “genesis, continuity, and totalization”.²⁶ In other words, “idea” emerges as a prism or a lens used by historians – intentionally or unintentionally, we should probably add – in studying questions of origin and emergence, in continuity with the later history of that which came into being, and as part of a kind of historical totality, a “life-history”, to use Lovejoy’s term. To Foucault then, “idea” is primarily a temporal figure, projecting onto the material a homogenous and continuous time, without breaks, gaps, or alternatives branches. Against this way of writing history, Foucault pits his own historiographical alternative, the “archeology”, which he calls “a systematic rejection of the postulates and procedures” of the history of ideas, in order to “write a completely in different story about what people have said.”²⁷ Characteristic of the questions Foucault wants to ask – “What is *a* science? What is *a* work? What is *a* theory? What is *a* concept? What is *a* text?”²⁸ – is the way they break up the idea of continuous, homogenous time, in terms of “continuity”, “tradition”, and “influence”,²⁹ and instead engages the moment, the immediacy and what Foucault calls “the positivity of discourse”³⁰, of actual texts or utterances. When Foucault embarks on his crusade to fight “the unreflecting continuities that organize discourse before we start analyzing it”,³¹ the first continuity he needs to take on is the

²⁵ Skinner, “A Reply to My Critics”, *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Edited and introduced by James Tully, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1988, 234.

²⁶ Foucault: *L’archéologie*, 181.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 12f.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid, for example 164.

³¹ Ibid., 36.

“idea”, which seems to guarantee the permanence of certain figures of thought beyond particular texts or contexts, beyond immediacies and positivities. His counter-concept to “ideas” in *L’archéologie du savoir* are “events”, more precisely “real events taking place in the order of discourse”,³² that is, when something is uttered or written, and thus creating responses and reactions, and establishing connections across the discursive field, long before this something has been labelled and boxed as a specific kind of utterance, belonging to a specific text, a work, or a science. Again, the temporality evoked is immediacy and discontinuity, as opposed to the continuity and permanence of ideas. Traditionally, historians have treated “discontinuity” as a problem, Foucault points out, as something they need to overcome in their attempt to create continuity; on the contrary, in the kind of historiography Foucault endorses, discontinuity, for example the discontinuity of events, is not the problem, but “that which defines the historical disciplines and verifies their interpretations”.³³ The threat comes from “the unreflecting forms of continuity”,³⁴ the blind faith in duration and permanence, which imposes on history a stable, continuous, and homogenous time, of long, in some time endless duration, into which historical events seem to disappear.

Although the philosophical presuppositions are very different, the attack Skinner launches on the “history of ideas” in one of his first essays, points to many of the same fundamental flaws. In “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, he presents two strings of criticism, two major critical arguments, which both essentially deal with the question of time and temporality. First, he attacks the belief in an essential and perennial meaning, which in some way or another is and remains present in certain specific words:

The great mistake lies not merely in looking for the “essential meaning” of the “idea” as something which must necessarily “remain the same,” but even in thinking of any “essential” meaning (to which individual writers “contribute”) at all.³⁵

³² Ibid.

³³ Foucault: *L’archéologie*, 17.

³⁴ Foucault: *L’archéologie*, 36.

³⁵ Skinner, “Meaning”, 37

Then, he presses on to argue, directly against Lovejoy, that the history of an idea can be nothing but the “history of a sentence”, and that the only thing such a history can actually hope to find out is if this sentence is actually present in the works of a specific author.³⁶ In other words, if there is continuity at all, it can only exist on an extremely superficial level, in terms of the repetition of certain combinations of letters and words. The real task of the historian, however, would consist in exploring what role or function the sentence has in the work of a specific author, at a specific time, at a specific place, in a specific context:

as soon as we see there is no determinate idea to which various writers contributed, but only a variety of statements made with the words by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions, then what we are seeing is equally that there is no history of the idea to be written, but only a history necessarily focused on the various agents who used the idea, and on their varying situations and intentions in using it. Such a history, moreover, can hardly be expected even to retain the form of the history of an idea.³⁷

Against the attempt to write “histories of ideas”, both Foucault and Skinner insists on the immediacy and contextuality of every linguistic utterance, produced in a specific historical context. Whereas Foucault, in an attempt to sideline the human subject as well as the social individual as the sole origin of historical change, insists on referring to utterances and texts as “events”, Skinner prefers to call them “actions”, “linguistic actions”, or even “speech acts”, in reference to the works of J.L. Austin and others,³⁸ thus explicitly bringing back the question of meaning and intention, from which Foucault was distancing himself. In this context, however, the interest is less with the contrast between actions and events, than with the fact that they both evoke the same temporality, the momentary and immediate, the discontinuous and instantaneuous, as opposed to the duration and permanence, even eternity of the idea. If different actions or events should prove to be similar, they are still mere repetitions of letters and words, which do not tell us anything about their historical role. They both also agree that the historical meaning, or rather significance of a text, is never something immanent to the

³⁶ Skinner, “Meaning”, 38.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Skinner, “Meaning”, 46-47.

text, in the way presupposed by the "history of ideas", in which the texts only are seen as media for communicating the "unit ideas", but something that exists only in the exteriority of discourses and political practices.

The most forceful part of Skinner's arguments is his criticism of the four "mythologies" of historiography, more specifically of the "history of ideas", which corresponds to Foucault's "unreflecting forms of continuity". According to the "mythology of doctrines", every philosopher in history, at least of a certain stature, must have formulated a doctrine for all the major questions in political philosophy;³⁹ according to the "mythology of coherence", every text – at least by a philosopher – must be systematic and coherent, to the extent that contradiction and paradoxes are "solved" by their later interpreters.⁴⁰ Already at this point, it is clear that all these mythologies produce permanence, by constructing systems of ideas, which guarantee both "genesis, continuity, and totalization", to use Foucault's terms. For the last two mythologies, however, the temporal issue, the production of permanence and continuity is even more explicit. By means of the "mythology of prolepsis", authors are given a role and significance, which they really did not obtain until much later, due to their adaption into the philosophical canon as well as to a practice of interpretation, by which the reader rediscovers in historical texts ideas that he knows from his own time. In this way, Machiavelli became the founder of modern political thinking.⁴¹ And finally, by means of the "mythology of parochialism", chains of influence, from one great author to the next, are created, based on the repetition of sentences as well as the free-flowing associations of the interpreters, using "ideas" as links between works which never had anything to do with each other in the first place.⁴²

Making away with "mythologies" and "unreflecting continuities", and restoring to utterances and texts their character of "event" and "action", Foucault and Skinner lay out a new program for the historical disciplines, which I in another context have labelled "philological".⁴³ In temporal terms, they replace the century-long "life-histories" of ideas,

³⁹ Ibid., 7-15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22-24.

⁴² Ibid., 24-25.

⁴³ Cf. Helge Jordheim, *Reading As Scholarly Practice. Toward a New Philology*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 2001 (in Norwegian: *Lesningens vitenskap. Mot en ny filologi*).

proclaimed by Lovejoy, with the much shorter time-span, even the immediacy of a historical moment. Theorized as either a discourse or a context, in terms of a set of "rules" (Foucault) or "conventions" (Skinner), this historical moment is not analyzed as part of a continuous historical process, but rather in terms of an intervention, an innovation, or a break, on which diachronic, long-term temporality only come to bear in a negative sense, as that which is no longer valid, which has lost its power.

Undoubtedly, the works by Foucault and Skinner, both published in 1969, had a major impact on how any kind of intellectual history – the history of science, literature, or political thought – was written, not least unleashing a new critical potential in historical studies, fuelled by the experience of the difference and the otherness of the past. Both of them also came to realize that something had gone lost on the way. Already in the second part of *L'archéologie du savoir*, Foucault started worrying about how his method risked bring history to a standstill,⁴⁴ whereas Skinner in his studies of the histories of the concept of liberty and of the state began tracing continuities between Early Modern Britain and our own time.⁴⁵ In returning to diachronic time, both of them selected the method and the genre of "genealogy", and started tracing origins and paths from the past and into the present. However, these paths often have strange and suprising, even disturbing, origins, and take unexpected turns, to the extent that temporal continuities should not be mistaken for continuities of meaning, in the way pioneered by Lovejoy.

Above two paradigms and two layers of time have emerged: on the one hand, Lovejoy's "ideas", which persist and unfold through centuries; on the other hand, Foucault's "events" and Skinner's "actions", which exist only in the relative immediacy of a specific context. To chose one or the other will give rise to very different histories. What becomes clear in considering Lovejoy's scholarly ambitions, as well as the attacks first by Mandelbaum, then, although less explicitly, by Foucault and Skinner, is that the primary function of the analytical term "idea" is not to identify a certain kind of epistemological object or an ontological sphere, but a certain kind or temporality, a certain level or layer in the stratigraphy of intellectual history. Both the supporters and opponents consider "idea" primarily as a figure of continuity, able to establish

⁴⁴ Foucault, *L'archéologie*, 216-232.

⁴⁵ Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002), 237-268.

connections, more or less material or associative, across long timespans. The temporal form of the "idea" – put to work in the "history of ideas" – can thus easily be identified in terms either of Bergson's *duree*, Heidegger's *Geschehen*, or Braudel's "structural time" and can be used for measuring and comparing the duration of particular forms of intellectual content. Foucault, Skinner, and others, like Stephen Greenblatt and the so-called New Historicists, have made a strong case that the presumption – or with Skinner, the "mythology" – of continuity blinds us for the specific contextual mechanisms, disciplinary and institutional practices, linguistic conventions, and discursive networks, which are at work in any intellectual product. Instead we fall victim of a complex set of canonizing practices, by which certain texts are inscribed in long intellectual traditions. To avoid this, we do better replace the analytics of ideas with the analytics of more contextual units, such as texts, utterances, linguistic actions or rhetorical interventions. However, in the current state of affairs there might be a set of new and somewhat different reasons for raising again questions about the time scales and time layers of intellectual history. Large-scale comprehensive claims for continuity in the history of mankind have recently been made in influential bestsellers of evolutionary biology and psychology, by authors like Stephen Pinker and Yuval Harari, presenting us with a new and somewhat different context for discussion the long and short times of ideas, events and speech acts.⁴⁶

Stratigraphy and the Deep Time of Intellectual History

If we chose to reframe the two temporal horizons suggested above in terms of *levels* or *layers*, according to a Braudelian, or more recently, a Koselleckian model of history, the analyses offered by Skinner and Foucault can easily be identified with the top level, the level of political events and actions, succeeding each other at a relatively high speed. Koselleck refers to this as the "pragmatic" level, where concepts are analysed in regard to their "singular usage [*ihren einmaligen Gebrauch*]".⁴⁷ By contrast, Lovejoy's "history of ideas" clearly operates at the level Braudel refers to as "structural", consisting of social, political, or cultural, or in this case,

⁴⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, London: Random House, 2014; Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature. Why Violence Has Declined*, London: Penguin Books, 2011.

⁴⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, "Stichwort: Begriffsgeschichte", *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2006, 100.

intellectual and linguistic patterns. Again Koselleck's application of multi-layered time to the history of concepts might be useful: To Koselleck, this is the level of semantics, "in which often century-old experiences are stored", until they are reactivated by new uses of the same concepts, or, in Lovejoy's case, new formulations or adaptations of the same idea.⁴⁸ But whereas Skinner and Foucault, at least in their 1969 works, reject the possibility of studying long-term structural continuities in language, more specifically in philosophical language, both Braudel and Koselleck perceive the different levels or layers as forming a structure, similar to the geological structures of mountains or rocks, which can and should be studied in its own right – what Pomian refers to as the "stratigraphy of time and history".⁴⁹ According to Koselleck, "the synchronic and the diachronic are combined in different ways, dependent on the question at hand".⁵⁰ However, both of them add a third layer that appears to be absent from the discussions and arguments we have been going through so far. In Koselleck, the third and deepest layer is "syntactic and grammatic", it is "long-term, repetitive and changes only slowly [*der Spielraum einer Begriffsverwendung in langfristig sich wiederholender, nur langsam sich verändernder Weise*]".⁵¹ To Braudel, on the contrary, the third and deepest layer is the much discussed *longue duree*, which unfolds not in language, but in man's relationship to his natural environments, landscape, climate, other forms of life etc. At the time when Braudel first launched the notion of *la longue duree*, pioneered by other members of the French Annales school, one main ambition was to slow history down to a degree that it could be viewed as structure, more than event and process, and thus be made accessible for structural and indeed structuralist analysis.⁵² Today, faced with the fact that humans during the last two centuries have become «geological agents» in their own right, leading to a possible formal revision in the geological time scale and the introduction of a new geological epoch, *the Anthropocene*, this third and deepest layer in what Andrew Shyrock and Daniel Lord Smail has referred to as «the

⁴⁸ Skinner has pointed out the similarities between Lovejoy and Koselleck

⁴⁹ Jordheim, "Multiple Times", 502-505.

⁵⁰ Koselleck, "Stichwort", 100.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée", *Annales ESC* 18, no. 4 (1958), 725-753.

dense layer cake of time» has taken on new relevance and new dimensions.⁵³

The question I want to raise in the third part of this essay is if the introduction of what is mostly referred to as «deep time», as shorthand for all time scales which go beyond the six thousand years of human history that have so far been the interest of historians, will have any impact on intellectual history, and in what way. Foucault's and Skinner's attack on Lovejoy implied a movement upwards through the layers of time, from the structural and semantic continuities of ideas to the pragmatic immediacy of events and actions; at present, faced with the possibility of an imminent climate catastrophe as well as the with our newfound self-consciousness as geological agents in the geological period of the Anthropocene, we might need to move downwards, as recently suggested by Dipesh Chakrabarty, in order to understand both past, present and future.⁵⁴ As historians we are challenged to descend into the layer of «deep time» and «deep history». Exactly what kind of temporal layer we are descending into, what kind of durations, rhythms, continuities and discontinuities it entails, is far from certain, neither are the outcomes of the on-going negotiations between human and natural histories, set off by the inscription of 21st century human existence into geological and biological history. Even harder to answer is the question what would be the main object of study. Ascending through the layers of time, from the structural to the event-based, ideas were transformed into utterances, events, and actions, semantics into pragmatics; descending through the same levels, however, it is hard to tell what will happen to the ideas as our main objects of study. There is no reason to believe, however, that Koselleck's reference to grammar and syntax, strangely echoing structuralist paradigms and presupposing the existence of written records, is going to be of much help.

Recently, «deep history» or «deep time» has become names for different time scales, which have in common that they go beyond the time frames that traditionally guide historical inquiries. What this means, however, varies between disciplines: whereas archeologists and human evolutionary biologists locate «deep time» to «the simple societies of the Paleolithic», Shyrock and Smail point out, historians tends to consider «Greco-Roman Antiquity» as the

⁵³ Andrew Shyrock and Daniel Lord Smail, "Introduction", *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 3.

⁵⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry* 35/2 (2009), 216-217.

«deep time» of their discipline, hence, thus remaining well within the Lovejoyan framework for the History of Ideas.⁵⁵ Since «the time revolution of the 1860s», they argue, when geology took human history into a limitless time before Eden, history of humankind has been haunted by a «fragmentation of historical time». Historians are still largely in «the grip of sacred history», in which mankind emerged from Eden around six thousand years ago, ignoring completely close to two million years of human history, or rather, leaving it to archeologists, anthropologists, and evolutionary biologists. In a methodological perspective, this temporal «straightjacket»⁵⁶ – which also serves to exclude an entire continent from historiographical interest, Africa – was supported by the choice of a specific kind of sources as well as a specific set of scholarly procedures: the analysis of written documents, accompanied by serious and sustained *Quellenkritik*. The part of the history of mankind that had no documents, in other words, everything older than six thousand years, disappears from sight. In much present historiography this extremely short, quasi-Biblical chronology is made even shorter by the unresiding interest of historians in progress, modernization and political and economic development, hence, in the last three hundred years of human history.

In his recent books on «deep history», Smail sets out to loosen the grip of sacred history on present historiography in order to produce what he refers to as «reunion in history».⁵⁷ Only in this way would all disciplines dedicated to studying the history of mankind, historians, archeologists, evolutionary biologist and neurologists, among others, be able to pool their resources, learn from each other, and thus produce integrated and cross-disciplinary knowledge about the past. Again, the question of continuity in history is raised, but in a very different form from the one we found in the works of Lovejoy, Skinner and Foucault. The continuity in question is “the continuity between the biological descent of hominids and the ‘ascent of civilization’ of the abstract ‘mankind’ of humanistic historical writing”, in a phrase by Mott Greene.⁵⁸ To write “deep history”, according to Smail, means “bundling together the Paleolithic and the Neolithic” – that is the Old Stone Age, which began approximately 2,5

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 1

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2

million years ago, and the New Stone Age, “the period between the shift to agriculture roughly 10,000 years ago and the invention of bronze tools” – “with the Postlithic”, meaning “everything that has happened since the emergence of metal technology, writing, and cities some 5,500 years ago”.⁵⁹ And he adds, in a wishful, rather than analytic mode, evoking dreams of continuity which go way back in the historical disciplines: “The result is a seamless narrative that acknowledges the full chronology of the human past.”⁶⁰

In reference to Smail’s somewhat naïve belief in the continuity of history, both synchronically and diachronically, there are good reasons for asking to what extent his wish for a specific form of chronology, namely the «seamless» and «full» one,⁶¹ predisposes him for making the theoretical choices that he then goes on to make, when he centres his narrative on «biology, brain, and behavior». Even less convincing appears his ensuing claim that «deep history can coalesce around any number of narrative threads».⁶² To continue in this directions, however, which seems, almost by necessity, to lead to a discussion of what it means to be human, risks derailing us from our real interest here: possible – and even impossible – time frames for writing intellectual history.

In the ‘stratigraphy’ of intellectual history suggested earlier, it became obvious that particular temporal scales were linked to particular objects of study: In the fast-paced top layer, we may study events and actions, in the considerably slower, but still dynamic middle layer, we turn our attention to ideas. I will conclude this essay by looking what might turn out to be the objects of study in the bottom layer, in «deep time».

As far as I know, the book on intellectual history in deep time has yet to be written. If we take a quick look at neighbouring disciplines, however, there are books both on «literature through deep time» (Wai Chee Dimock) and «the deep time of the media» (Zielinski).⁶³ It should be noted, however, that none of these books actually set out to construct a «seamless»

⁵⁹ Ibid., 3

⁶⁰ Ibid..

⁶¹ “Seamless” in reference to the unfolding of history returns several times in Smail’s book, for example on pages 6, 7, and 149: “This is the logic that makes the deep past legible” (6).

⁶² Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 3

⁶³ Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Through Deep Time*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008; Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media. Toward an Archeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2006.

and continuous chronology from the Paleolithic, through the Neolithic into the Postlithic. Whereas the first is an attempt at connecting American literature to the longer – but still in our perspective quite short – chronologies of civilizations on other continents, the second begins the historical work with Greek Antiquity, well within the temporal «straightjacket» of Western historiography.

Among the most famous works that make claims – at least implicitly – about writing an intellectual history according to «deep time» are Steven Pinker's recent *The Better Angels of Our Nature*. «Deep» in this case means «from 8000 BCE to the 1970s»⁶⁴. In other words, even though Pinker invokes a much longer chronology than Dimock and Zielinski, he still makes halt at the border between the Neolithic, which he refers to as «human prehistory»,⁶⁵ a kind of periodization sharply criticized by both Smail and Greene, and the Paleolithic. Between the Ice Age and Modernity, Pinker argues, humankind have experienced a steady decline of violence, despite our current impression that our world is «a nightmare of crime, terrorism, genocide, and war».⁶⁶ In part, Pinker substantiates his arguments by means of numbers and graphs, showing a decline in the number of violent deaths; his «explanation», on the other hand, is based on what could be considered a 'deep intellectual history'. Pinker himself calls it «an explanation in terms of psychology and history: how human minds deal with changing circumstances», and he continues:

The theory of mind that I will invoke is the synthesis of cognitive science, affective and cognitive neuroscience, social and evolutionary psychology, and other sciences of human nature that I explored in *How the Mind Works*, *The Blank Slate*, and *The Stuff of Thought*. According to this understanding, the mind is a complex system of cognitive and emotional faculties implemented in the brain which owe their basic design to the processes of evolution.⁶⁷

In his prior books, Pinker attacks the idea that the human mind is somehow without innate traits, a *tabula rasa*, or «blank slate», and that we can form our ideas and make our choices

⁶⁴ Pinker, *The Better Angels*, 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2-4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., xxi.

⁶⁷ Ibid., xxii.

free from biology. On the contrary, he argues, our minds are formed by evolutionary psychological processes, and thus, predisposed to think and behave in specific ways, for instance more peacefully and less violent.⁶⁸

To the question if Pinker's evolutionary psychology can be taken as a model for practicing intellectual history in deep time, or on the contrary, if what it really represents, is a radically ahistorical argument about human nature, in which history is nothing but a prop, there will be different answers, which cannot be discussed at any length here. It is interesting to observe, however, that in the introduction to his work *On Deep History and the Brain*, Smail explicitly distances himself from evolutionary psychology as a way of writing «deep history»:

This book is not a proposal to bring evolutionary psychology into the realm of history. For reasons discussed at length in chapter 4, evolutionary psychology, at least as the field is currently defined, is not especially helpful to the historical enterprise. I am a firm believer that historians need to work with psychology and neurobiology.[...]. But evolutionary psychology, with its inexorable presentism, is not, I think, the way to go. This book charts an alternative path.⁶⁹

In order to stake out this «alternative path», Smail starts by asking about possible objects of study: «climate and ecology, disease, webs and exchanges, human morphology, sex and gender».⁷⁰ His object of preference, however, is the brain, «the most obvious device for making the deep past intelligible» as well as for «building a continuous narrative»,⁷¹ thus, in a certain sense, opting for an intellectual, rather than a social or cultural history in deep time.

Unfortunately, Smail does not really make a coherent attempt at drafting what a deep history of mankind focusing on the brain might entail. Instead he sets out to navigate the pitfalls of different disciplinary traditions, such as ethology, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, as well as different conceptual strategies such as «adaptive variation», «genotypes and phenotypes» etc. Nevertheless, he offers a few pointers of what such a history could look

⁶⁸ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate. The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, London: Penguin Books, 2003.

⁶⁹ Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*, 8.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

like. Smail's ideas for a deep history – what he now terms a «new neurohistory»⁷² – is based on recent findings of neuropsychology and neurophysiology, and presupposes the existence of brain structures and body chemicals which influence ways of feeling and thinking: moods, emotions and predispositions. One of his main examples is disgust.⁷³ His lists of neurochemicals affecting human emotions include prolactin, oxytocin, epinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, only to mention a few.⁷⁴ At first, it seems that his neurohistorical claims are only valid for feelings, instinctive reactions, behavioral patterns, but he also goes on to argue that they can contribute in explaining «key elements of human economic, political, and social activity».⁷⁵ Not least, historians should study the «rapid increase in the range of economic, political, and social devices that serve to modulate the body states of self and others», ranging «from religious liturgies, sports, education, novel reading, and military training, all of which stimulate the production or reuptake of neurochemicals and create or remove synapses and receptors, to the agricultural and economic practices that promote commerce in chemicals like alcohol, caffeine, and opiates, which alter body chemistry in a more direct fashion».⁷⁶ The entire last chapter of the book are dedicated to these mood-altering practices, behaviors, and institutions generated by human culture, which Smail refers to as «psychotropic mechanisms».⁷⁷

If we are to believe Smail, the deepest level in the stratigraphy of intellectual history contains moods, emotions, and behavioral patterns, as well as the neurochemicals that produce them, but also all the practices and devices that have been developed through the long history of humankind, to alter and control these bodily responses, both in terms of drugs and in terms of social institutions. But even if we were prone to reject this as a meaningful way of writing intellectual history, we will need to deal with the other implications following from this change of temporal scale: that the evidence, as Smail puts it, «comes not from written documents but from the other things that teach— from artefacts, fossils, vegetable remains, phonemes, and

⁷² Ibid., 112.

⁷³ Ibid., 114-115.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 116-117.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 161.

various forms of modern DNA». These are all traces encoding information about the past, and just like the written records, historians are used to dealing with, their much-fetishized sources, they need to be approached with curiosity, and respect. Talking about them, Smail exploits the multimodal possibilities of the concepts of reading and interpretation: «they resist an easy reading and must be interpreted with care».⁷⁸

In this final insistence on the element of “care” in dealing with the sources, all the other authors discussed in this essay, Lovejoy, Skinner, and Foucault, would undoubtedly have agreed, even though Foucault might have objected to the use of the term “interpret” in describing this activity. But rather than insisting on the common ground between these different scholarly enterprises, which all in different ways could be labelled “intellectual history”, my point here is to highlight the differences, more precisely, those particular differences that have to do with the temporal frameworks, which the authors apply to their material: the structural continuities of “ideas”, the discontinuities of “events” and “speech acts”, and finally, the deep time of “neurohistory” and biochemistry. Furthermore, I wanted to highlight the fact that in all these cases there is a close connection between the choice of temporal framework and the choice of object of study, or, in other words, that objects of study are chosen based on their duration, on their degree of permanence. Objects and time frames condition and reinforce each other mutually.

Finally, this essay is not the place for starting a systematic discussion of what a ‘stratigraphy’ of intellectual history might eventually look like; rather, my point here has been to suggest the possibility of a combination of different time scales, of moving upward and downward in the “layer cake of time”, in order to better understand how the role of thought and communication in human history.

⁷⁸ Ibid.