



## State of the Field: Histories of the Future

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### Abstract

In the last decade, future thinking has rapidly gained importance as a topic of historical study. This article provides an overview of the existing historiographies of future thinking as well as the actions and practices that follow such thoughts. We trace the pedigree of histories of the future back to the German historian of ideas Reinhart Koselleck and show how his conceptual framework has been adopted and adapted by later scholars. We highlight the sources and methods that are typically used. A particularly fruitful approach that emerges from our meta study revolves around the concept of pluritemporality – the coexistence of different layers of time. The article also seeks to uncover some weaknesses and biases that are still present in the field. The most urgent issue being probably the lack of consensus on a conceptual apparatus; other blind spots concern the relationship between future thinking and its linguistic expression in historical sources, the question of whose future thinking we are talking about, how future thinking relates to human action in the past, and how short-term futures interact with their long-term futures equivalents. Overall, however, the aim of this survey is to emphasise the potential of this burgeoning field for future historical research. Much is to be gained from new theories of historical time which are themselves the consequence of ideas about climate change and the dangers of the Anthropocene, human extinction and trans- and post-humanism and about artificial intelligence and the digital world.

### I

In 2011, a team of psychologists surveyed a large group of people to find out how often the future crossed their minds. They found that the individuals under investigation thought about the future every sixteen minutes on average: work, leisure, errands, relationships and their future all crossed their minds regularly. Remarkably, thoughts about the past were only half as frequent.<sup>1</sup> Future-thinking – the sheer complexity of which is a distinguishing trait in humans from other species – is perhaps

All authors are involved in the project Back to the Future | Back to the Future | University of Antwerp ([uantwerpen.be](http://uantwerpen.be)).

<sup>1</sup> Arnaud D'Argembeau, Olivier Renaud, and Martial Van der Linden, 'Frequency, characteristics and functions of future-oriented thoughts in daily life', *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 25, no. 1 (2011); Roger E. Beaty, Paul Seli, and Daniel L. Schacter, 'Thinking about the past and future in daily life: an experience sampling study of individual differences in mental time travel', *Psychological Research*

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even the default mode of our brain.<sup>2</sup> Yet, to assume that future-thinking is universal across time, place and social groups would be a grave mistake. Maybe we think very differently about the future today than in the past, since the perception of the future is dependent on culturally specific systems of meaning and social structures that have always been subject of historical change. Future-thinking has a history, one that historians are increasingly fascinated by. Theories of historical time that have been around since the 1970s are gaining traction in empirical research across different periods and regions.<sup>3</sup> From which theories is this research strand drawing? Which sources and methods does it use? Is the interest in histories of the future a new turn within the so-called temporal turn? How is it connected to and connecting with parallel attention to the future in other social sciences?<sup>4</sup>

In his *Time and Power* (2018), Christopher Clark argues that from the 2010s onwards, a 'lively and diverse field' has been developing. Clark calls it a 'temporal turn' in historical studies, 'a shift in sensibilities comparable with the linguistic and cultural turns of the 1980s and 1990s, one of those repatterning of attention by which the discipline of history periodically refreshes itself'.<sup>5</sup> All historians will agree that time is not neutral or universal, it is 'a contingent cultural construction whose shape, structure, and texture have varied'.<sup>6</sup> However, time is too often treated as self-evident, or it is subsumed into other subjects of historical research such as memory, modernity and secularisation and horological, calendrical or other representational standardisations.<sup>7</sup> To account for these nuances,

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(2018); Roy F. Baumeister, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Gabriele Oettingen, 'Pragmatic prospection: how and why people think about the future', *Review of General Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Suddendorf, Jonathan Redshaw, and Adam Bulley, *The Invention of Tomorrow: A Natural History of Foresight* (London, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> An excellent and recent overview of these theories and especially their connections to modernity, our own times, the Anthropocene, and post-humanist history is to be found in Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time* (Cambridge, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> This article presents a non-exhaustive and selective overview of this recent work (starting around 2010). The works that are discussed here all come from a list of publications that was obtained after perusing several literature databases and bibliographies, reading the first batch of literature, perusing the footnotes and adding unseen publications to a new version of the list. We have cast our nets widely and have gone way beyond looking for the title word 'future' in publication databases. Particular attention was paid to recent theoretical contributions found in the recent issues of the journal *History & Theory*. Although all of the authors of this state of the field article are historians working on premodern history, we have sought to maintain a balance with studies from modern and contemporary history. For a more recent overview, although focused on twentieth-century German history, see Elke Seefried, 'Geschichte der Zukunft', (2023). We would like to thank the reviewers who urged us to find this balance.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Clark, *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Princeton, 2019), p. 4. See also Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (New Haven, 2007). The term 'temporal turn' was used for the first time in Nick Randall, 'Time and British politics: memory, the present and teleology in the politics of new labour', *British Politics* 4, no. 2 (2009). Specialised journals for the study of time are *Time and Society*, *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time and Temporalities: Revue de sciences sociales et humaines*.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, *Time and Power*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley, *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 5.

scholars often distinguish time from temporality, the importance of which Alexa Fryxell explains as follows:

For historians interested in humans as “temporal beings, beings who interact with their worlds in these ways over time”, getting at time is a pivotal means of understanding how historical agents constituted reality in a meaningful way, and how agents are constructed by their realities. Histories of temporality thus bring the interplay between agents and structures to the fore.<sup>8</sup>

Time can then be defined as a more objective entity, as a ‘unit of measurement’, often understood as time measured by clocks, calendars and natural media of time such as the sun and the moon.<sup>9</sup>

There has been considerable and recent interest in historical theory into the relations between past, present and future times.<sup>10</sup> A returning feature in the journal *History and Theory* explicitly deals with historical futures. Since 2021, authors in this feature have been exploring the relations between history and current and future problems such as climate change and the dangers of the Anthropocene, of human extinction and trans- and post-humanism, of artificial intelligence and the digital world.<sup>11</sup> Zoltán Boldizsár Simon has called our own period ‘times of unprecedented change’ with far-reaching consequences for the ways we write history today.<sup>12</sup> While these theoretical studies depart from our own times and look into what effects changes in the experience of time today and the recent past can have on the study of history, this state of the field article deals more with what Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm call ‘historical investigations into historical futures’.<sup>13</sup> This does not imply that the historical study of historical futures should not be informed by historical theory. On the contrary, we will show that while there may still be a gap between historical theories and the empirical study of historical futures, theories of history and an awareness of their concepts are the only way through which more empirical studies can agree on a

<sup>8</sup> A. R. P. Fryxell, ‘Time and the modern: current trends in the history of modern temporalities’, *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019), p. 296.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 286; Vanessa Ogle, ‘Time, temporality and the history of capitalism’, *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019), p. 314; Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Marek Tamm and Laurent Olivier, eds., *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism* (London, 2019); Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile, *Historical Understanding: Past, Present and Future* (London, 2022); Victoria Fareld, ‘Time’, in *The Routledge Companion to Historical Theory*, ed. Chiel van den Akker (London, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> The inaugural piece: Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, ‘Historical futures’, *History and Theory* 60, no. 1 (2021). Some historians even argue that historical methods can be used to investigate our own future: Cornelius Holtorf, ‘Periodization of the Future’, in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile (London, 2022); David J. Staley, ‘The future as a domain of historical inquiry’, in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile (London, 2022); David J. Staley, *History and Future: Using Historical Thinking to Imagine the Future* (Lanham, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, *History in Times of Unprecedented Change: A Theory for the 21st Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Simon and Tamm, ‘Historical futures’, p. 10.

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common framework, rather than having to reinvent the wheel every time.<sup>14</sup> For example, forms of time, such as cyclical or linear time, are both a part of past perceptions of time and an analytical means of historians today.<sup>15</sup>

While historical memory has long been a favourite subject of historians, its counterpart, the historical future, is not yet an established field.<sup>16</sup> ‘The tricky and slippery concept of the future’<sup>17</sup> has proven to be a fertile soil for confounding, overlapping or even contradictory definitions.<sup>18</sup> Following Lucian Hölscher, a theorist of history and historiography, this article defines the future as a constellation of three characteristics. First, the future is a relational concept: whether something is future or not depends on the present or past point in time one selects. Second, the future is hybrid in character: the future is both a subjective projection of the present and an objective and present-bound dimension of historical reality. Some of the projections made in the present may come true, but they could also turn out completely different. The future is contingent, yet also a moment in time to come, after the present moment. Third, the future is neither fiction nor reality: an event in the future might (not) happen and therefore (not) become reality at a later point in time.<sup>19</sup>

## II

Most of the works discussed here trace their historiographical pedigree back to the German historian of ideas Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), adopting and adapting his sketch of the historical evolution of the future and the variety of related concepts that support it.<sup>20</sup> In Koselleck’s sketch of the long-term history of the future, the Middle Ages are characterised by the dominance of Christian eschatology and expectations of the apocalypse: the future was underpinned by both a constant expectation

<sup>14</sup> In current sociological analyses of the future, there is the similar issue of limited feedback to social theories. Like histories of the future, sociologies of the future are a growing and dynamic area of research but not yet a field. Lisa Suckert, ‘Back to the future. Sociological perspectives on expectations, aspirations and imagined futures’, *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie* (2022).

<sup>15</sup> Gabrielle Spiegel, ‘Structures of time in medieval historiography’, *The Medieval History Journal* 19, no. 1 (2016); Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan, ‘Temporalities in southeast Asian historiography’, *History and Theory* 59, no. 2 (2020). On figures of time: Lucian Hölscher, ‘Virtual historiography: opening history towards the future’, *History and Theory* 61, no. 1 (2022); Lucian Hölscher, ‘Time gardens: Historical concepts in modern historiography’, *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (2014).

<sup>16</sup> See the journal: *History & Memory*; Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Oxford, 2017); Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Lucian Hölscher, ‘Virtual historiography: opening history towards the future’, *History and Theory* 61, no. 1 (2022), p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Heike Paul, ed., *Critical Terms in Futures Studies* (London, 2019) provides short descriptions of keywords related to Futures Studies that are very useful to historians: decision, hope, ignorance, planning and so forth.

<sup>19</sup> Hölscher, ‘Virtual historiography’, pp. 29–32.

<sup>20</sup> Most studies on the histories of the future offer a condensed overview of Koselleck’s theories. A good overview of Koselleck’s work is Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (New York, 2012).

of the near end of the world and a continuous suspension of that end.<sup>21</sup> From the sixteenth century onwards, however, this conception of the future began to be questioned and made room for an alternative view. Koselleck describes this shift as the outcome of five different but largely simultaneous developments. First, the calculated end of the world moved ever further away from the respective present. Second, the rise of natural sciences not only aimed at determining the end of the world, it also populated the period between the present and the end with various future events. Third, drawing on Jean Bodin, Koselleck observed a ‘deteleologicization’ of human history: to Bodin, human history had no goal, no *telos* anymore; it was the domain of probability and human prudence. Fourth, absolutist states sought to exercise a monopoly of control over the future by outlawing various kinds of prophecies. Fifth and lastly, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the distinction between ancient, medieval and modern became broadly established. In the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment produced a philosophy of progress which, in turn, stimulated the French Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

Koselleck situates this shift broadly between 1750 and 1850, a period he describes as the *Sattelzeit* (Saddle Time) and the beginning of modernity in Western Europe.<sup>23</sup> Modernity and the modern world are typified by a pronounced distinction between past, present and future as well as a growing orientation toward the future.<sup>24</sup> Modernity is associated with the birth of a new and modern concept of the future: a fundamentally unknown entity, open, uncertain and constructible, full of opportunities and threats. According to Koselleck, it was at this time that people started to believe that the course of future events was in their hands; real improvement of the condition humaine became possible.<sup>25</sup> Javier

<sup>21</sup> It goes without saying that there is a long bibliography on apocalypticism throughout the ages. A recent overview: Hans-Christian Lehner, *The End(S) of Time(S): Apocalypticism, Messianism, and Utopianism through the Ages* (Leiden, 2021); Veronika Wieser, Vincent Eltschinger, and Johann Heiss, *Cultures of Eschatology* (Berlin, Boston, 2020); Jerry L. Walls, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford, 2007); Richard Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of the Millennial Experience* (Oxford, 2011); Nadia Al-Bagdadi, David Marno, and Matthias Riedl, eds., *Apocalyptic Complex: Perspectives, Histories, Persistence* (Budapest, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004), especially pp. 9–25 (modernity and the planes of historicity). Many of his other essays are published and translated here: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2002); Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* (Stanford, 2018). Lynn Hunt argues that ‘The Revolution consequently opened the prospect of a new kind of voluntarism, that is, the notion that human will could consciously shape the future and thereby accelerate the effects of time’: Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest, 2008), chapter 2, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Gabriel Motzkin, ‘On the Notion of Historical (Dis)Continuity: Reinhart Koselleck’s Construction of the *Sattelzeit*’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1, no. 2 (2005); Daniel Fulda, ‘*Sattelzeit*. Karriere und Problematik eines Kulturwissenschaftlichen Zentralbegriffs’, in *Sattelzeit. Historiographiegeschichtliche Revisionen*, ed. Daniel Fulda and Elisabeth Décultot (Berlin, 2016); Achim Landwehr, ed., *Frühe Neue Zeiten. Zeitwissen zwischen Reformation und Revolution* (Bielefeld, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 245–77 (Neuzeit: remarks on the semantics of modern concepts of movement); Simon and Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time*.

<sup>25</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 21, 49, 60, 143, 198.

Fernández-Sebastián sees a similar *Sattelzeit* change in the same period in Spain, Portugal and much of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking America, drawing on texts by literati, philosophers, politicians and journalists.<sup>26</sup>

Lucian Hölscher elaborated and extended Koselleck's long-term sketch on the history of the future. First, he stresses that in the medieval period, the future combined a clear endpoint (the imminent End of the World) with repetitive cyclicity: sowing and harvesting, disease and health, war and peace, the rise and fall of kingdoms. Second, he also moves the breaking point, the arrival of a new concept of the future, to the seventeenth century, calling it the period of the 'discovery of the future'. Third, he provides a history of the future for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which he characterises as a cyclical succession of optimistic and pessimistic episodes. Thanks to democracy and social reform, optimism reigned from 1830 to the revolutionary year 1848, when disappointment took over. The technological progress of the 1890s gave new hope but also carried the seeds of the destruction of World War One and the National-Socialist thousand-year Third Reich which brought about the Second World War and the Holocaust. The renewed belief in technology after the war created a new wave of optimism in the United States and Western Europe. The idea of the planned economy and the advent of scenario-thinking also confirmed beliefs in a malleable and predictable future. In the seventies and eighties, the negative effects of growth and technology became clear, and a cycle of pessimism started again. The future was no longer a time of progress but disintegrated into many possible futures, some of which desirable, but some of which, like scenarios of average temperature increase of more than 1.5 degrees, very undesirable.<sup>27</sup>

Another expansion of Koselleck's narrative of historical time is the French historian François Hartog's succession of three 'regimes of historicity' ('ways in which these universal categories or forms we call "the past", "the present", and "the future" are articulated').<sup>28</sup> Hartog historicises these regimes by capturing the transition from one regime to another: from a past-orientation until the French Revolution to a future-orientation until the late 1980s and the end of the twentieth century with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a present-orientation in the years since. Today, we live in the age of presentism: the present is its own horizon, the future is no longer

<sup>26</sup> Javier Fernández-Sebastián, 'A World in the making: discovering the future in the Hispanic world', *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 11, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>27</sup> Lucian Hölscher, *Die Entdeckung Der Zukunft* (Frankfurt, 1999); Lucian Hölscher, 'The history of the future. The emergence and decline of a temporal concept in European history', *History of Concepts Newsletter* 5 (2002); Lucian Hölscher, ed., *Die Zukunft des 20. Jahrhunderts. Dimensionen einer Historischen Zukunftsforschung* (Frankfurt, 2017); Lucian Hölscher, 'Future-thinking: a historical perspective', in *The Psychology of Thinking About the Future*, ed. Gabriele Oettingen, A. Timur Sevincer, and Peter M. Gollwitzer (Guilford, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York, 2015), p. 17.

open and full of promise: it has become a menace.<sup>29</sup> Like Hartog, we should not assume that the dominance of one regime of historicity was absolute and completely overshadowed the others.<sup>30</sup> Jérôme Baschet, for instance, shows that the regime of historicity prominent in the medieval church, which combined chronological time with the Incarnation and the end of time, was at times disputed by various movements who thought the end of times was really near.<sup>31</sup> As such, regimes of historicity can be studied within different time periods and act as analytical categories. Aleida Assmann's 'cultural time regime' is 'a complex of deeply held cultural presuppositions, values and decisions that guide human desires, action, emotions, and assessments, without individuals necessarily being aware of these foundations'.<sup>32</sup> She explores the relationships between past, present and the future and the profound transformation they were undergoing at the end of the previous century: by the 1980s, the modern temporal structure in which the future was all-dominant had come to an end. By untangling the relations between the traumas of the past and the structural triad of past, present and future – as Assmann does – historians can arrive at radically different conceptions of historical time, which can prove to be valuable tools for the history of the future as well.<sup>33</sup>

Many historians have taken issue with the idea of the 'opening up' or discovery of the (modern) future as Koselleck and his followers described it. Medievalists, for example, have pointed out the much richer panorama of futures present in the Middle Ages.<sup>34</sup> Klaus Oschema, for instance, argues that surely the Christian end times played a role in the future expectations of medieval people, but they also conceived of both an immanent vision of the future and a medium-term personal and social one that they actively tried to influence, for example by means of astrology. Rather than arguing that such a medieval understanding of the future was modern, Oschema claims that medieval futures were not radically different from how medieval people viewed the present or past.<sup>35</sup> Brent

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pp. 191–204.

<sup>30</sup> Social theorist Felipe Torres argues that temporal regimes can co-exist and interact. Felipe Torres, *Temporal Regimes: Materiality, Politics, Technology* (London, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> François Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (New York, 2022), pp. 1–3; Jérôme Baschet, *La civilisation féodale: de l'an mil à la colonisation de l'Amérique* (Paris, 2004), part 2, chapter 1; Jérôme Baschet, 'Reopening the future: emerging worlds and novel historical futures', *History and Theory* 61, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>32</sup> Aleida Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, trans. Sarah Clift (Ithaca, 2020), p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Assmann, *Is Time out of Joint?*, p. 184. Fareld, 'Time', p. 565. For example, Gabrielle M. Spiegel, 'Memory and history: liturgical time and historical time', *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002). Spiegel compares Jewish historical thought in the Middle Ages with such writing during and after the Holocaust and considers the implications of trauma and what she calls liturgical time.

<sup>34</sup> Felicitas Schmieder, ed., *Mittelalterliche Zukunftsgestaltung im Angesicht des Weltendes*, vol. 77, *Behefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* (Cologne, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Klaus Oschema, 'Die Zukunft Des Mittelalters. Befunde, Probleme und (Astrologische) Einblicke', in *Zukunft im Mittelalter. Zeitkonzepte und Planungsstrategien*, ed. Klaus Oschema and Bernd Schneidmüller (Ostfildern, 2021). This harks back to a forgotten piece by Jacques Le Goff on the medieval future: Jacques Le Goff, 'Le Moyen Âge entre le futur et l'avenir', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* (1984).

D. Shaw goes even deeper into time and considers the question whether the ancient Romans had a future. His nuanced analysis makes clear that the Romans did not conceive of a deep, long-term future which, for example, had consequences for the empire's mechanisms of public finance.<sup>36</sup> Tracing the tipping point between the premodern and the modern future is perhaps beside the point and very much dependent on the definition of future, considering that future expectations in different times and places – for the historiography is still very much focused on Europe, although we do see a growing interest in histories of the future in other regions of the world – do produce interesting new insights in mentalities and cultures.<sup>37</sup>

Koselleck did not only draw a long-term chronological sketch of the history of the future, he also provided historians with a subtle conceptual framework in his *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (1979). A short summary of Koselleck's framework might be of help to the reader, especially since many historians of the future draw from and build upon these concepts in their own studies. A first central pair of Koselleck's concepts is the 'space of experience' (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the 'horizon of expectation' (*Erwartungshorizont*).<sup>38</sup> A historical subject's space of experience consists of the past that was alive in them, whether consciously or not. Its interdependent mirror image is the horizon of expectation: the expectations, hopes, fears and sense of what will come in the future. 'Space' and 'horizon' serve to stress the ontological difference between both: an experience consists of several isolated, never complete memories 'assembled into a totality'; on the contrary, an expectation is limited by the evermoving 'line' between the experienced and that which can be predicted but not (yet) experienced.<sup>39</sup>

A second conceptual pair consists of the past futures and the future pasts. To study past futures, the historian goes back in time and investigates the future as it was perceived at that moment. A future past is the opposite: here, the historian takes a position in the future as vantage point to look back at the past, which thus includes the past that came before the historian, the historian's present and all future time between the historian's present and the vantage point.<sup>40</sup> A good example of a future past described by historians is Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway's book *The Collapse of Western Civilization* (2014). Written from the perspective of a fictional historian living in China in 2393, the book describes the collapse of the West due to climate change.

<sup>36</sup> Brent D. Shaw, 'Did the Romans have a future?', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 109 (2019).

<sup>37</sup> On such tipping points and the proof for their existence: Lucian Hölscher, 'The discovery of the future in early modern Europe', *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 64, no. 2 (2022).

<sup>38</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 278–98 (Space of experience and horizon of expectation: two historical categories).

<sup>39</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik Geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979), pp. 354–7.

<sup>40</sup> Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*, 300–348; Lucian Hölscher, 'Future pasts: about a form of thought in modern society', *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 4 (2019).



The way in which historians borrow from Koselleck is aptly described by Vanessa Ogle: ‘In my view, his writings cohere uneasily, amounting more to a loose collection of positions and insights from which it is best to draw eclectically’.<sup>41</sup> Such borrowing, while certainly fruitful for historiography, has produced a plethora of different concepts to approach histories of the future but has also led to a Babylonian tangle of concepts. Since new ideas about historical futures surfacing at this very moment are overturning some of Koselleck’s ideas, historians who want to write histories of the future should not only rely on the work of Koselleck but need to take into account more recent theoretisations of historical temporalities and of the future which are included in this paper.<sup>42</sup>

### III

Another important criticism launched at Koselleck’s and Hartog’s histories of temporality (mainly in the Anglophone world where their reception was quite selective) is the sequential nature of their description of temporal regimes.<sup>43</sup> This critique does no justice to Koselleck’s opus in which ideas on multiple and parallel temporalities were clearly developed. In fact, Koselleck urges historians to distinguish between the many *Zeitschichten* or sediments of historical time, for example to overcome the dichotomy between linear and cyclical time.<sup>44</sup>

The historiography on temporalities of the last twenty years highlighted exactly the existence of multiple temporal layers which could (and do) overlap and interact.<sup>45</sup> An early example of this shift to multiple temporal layers referring to the future is Jean-Claude Schmitt’s analysis of medieval charters of donation. These charters contain at least four types of thinking about the future: the personal future (which ends with the donator’s life); the infinite future of human life in an endless

<sup>41</sup> Ogle, ‘Time, temporality and the history of capitalism’.

<sup>42</sup> Simon and Tamm, ‘Historical futures’, p. 11; Simon and Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time*.

<sup>43</sup> For example: Peter Burke, ‘Futures past: on the semantics of historical time’, *History of European Ideas* 8, no. 6 (1987); Peter Burke, ‘Foreword: the history of the future, 1350–2000’, in *The Uses of the Future in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrea Brady and Emily Butterworth (New York, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, pp. 3–4; Juhan Hella, ‘Koselleck on modernity, history and layers of time’, *History and Theory* 59, no. 2 (2020); Helge Jordheim, ‘Against periodization: Koselleck’s theory of multiple temporalities’, *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012); Niklas Olsen, ‘Reinhard Koselleck. Sediments of time: on possible histories’, *The American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (2019); John H. Zammito, ‘Koselleck’s Times’, *History and Theory* 60, no. 2 (2021); Chris Lorenz, ‘Probing the limits of a metaphor: on the stratigraphic model in history and geology’, in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Zolt Simon, et al. (London, 2022).

<sup>45</sup> This idea was developed in a scattered form throughout Koselleck’s work. Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, 3–10; Achim Landwehr, ‘Alte Zeiten, Neue Zeiten: Aussichten auf die Zeit-Geschichte’, in *Frühe Neue Zeiten*, ed. Landwehr Achim (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012); Ralf-Peter Fuchs, ‘Gegen die Apokalypse? Zukunftsdiskurse im Dreißigjährigen Krieg’, in *Neue Zeiten. Zeitwissen zwischen Reformation und Revolution*, ed. Achim Landwehr (Bielefeld: 2012); Matthew S. Champion, ‘A fuller history of temporalities’, *Past & Present* 243, no. 1 (2019); Christian Kiening, ‘Hybride Zeiten: Temporale Dynamiken 1400–1600’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 140, no. 2 (2018). An overview of recent approaches to the multiplicity of historical times is Simon and Tamm, *The Fabric of Historical Time*, pp. 19–24 and 32–45.

series of generations; the cyclical future (the repetition of rituals such as masses or the rent payments) and finally, the eschatological future (the donor's hope for salvation in the afterlife as the result of his bequest).<sup>46</sup>

The coexistence of multiple temporalities, or pluritemporality for short, has become a conceptual tool that many historians use: the historian needs to 'uncover diverse textures of temporality in particular settings'.<sup>47</sup> Rüdiger Graf specifies that this is also true for histories of the future: the goal of the historian should be the pluralisation of different futures.<sup>48</sup> Such different temporalities ranged between large eschatological frameworks, individual lifespans, calendar systems and quotidian routines.<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Scott Baker observes four such concepts of the future in Renaissance Italy: (1) the eschatological Christian future; (2) the claims of divinatory techniques; (3) the daily life, prudential impression of the future that was already very old and (4) the new future which is an unknown and unknowable time-to-come.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, in the Holy Roman Empire during the Thirty Years' War, political precautions for the future, including keeping the peace, co-existed with the belief that the End of times was near.<sup>51</sup> For the First World War period, Sabine Mischner used letters and diaries to lay bare the praxeological conceptions of time and more precisely the construction of shared futures in correspondences between the military front and the home front.<sup>52</sup>

A key feature of pluritemporality is that the different layers of time 'coexist and interpenetrate'.<sup>53</sup> Yet, this awareness of the plurality of temporalities also comes with a risk: 'If pressed too far, histories of temporalities could simply assert that nothing ever changed, and everything was always and everywhere a flux of time'.<sup>54</sup> A solution to this problem is to distinguish between a diachronic and a synchronic

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Claude Schmitt, 'Appropriating the future', in *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages*, ed. John A. Burrow and Ian P. Wei (Rochester: Boydell, 2000). Also based on medieval charters of donation: Benjamin Scheller, 'Erfahrung, Erwartung Und Erlösung: Die Stiftungen des Mittelalters als Zukunftspraxis', in *Zukunft Im Mittelalter. Zeitkonzepte und Planungsstrategien*, ed. Klaus Oschema and Bernd Schneidmüller (Ostfildern, 2021). See also Etienne Bourdon, 'Temporalities and History in the Renaissance', *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 6 (2017).

<sup>47</sup> Matthew S. Champion, *The Fullness of Time: Temporalities of the Fifteenth-Century Low Countries* (Chicago, 2017), p. 2; the Viewpoints dossier in *Past & Present*, 2019, 243, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Rüdiger Graf, 'Ignorance is bliss: the pluralization of the future as a challenge to contemporary history', in *Futures*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Jenny Andersson (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Champion calls this the fullness of time, Champion, 'A fuller history of temporalities' and champion, *The Fullness of Time*. See also: Liesbeth Corens, 'Seasonable coexistence: temporality, health care and confessional relations in spa, C.1648–1740', *Past & Present*, 256, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Scott Baker, *In Fortune's Theater: Financial Risk and the Future in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2021).

<sup>51</sup> Fuchs, 'Gegen die Apokalypse? Zukunftsdiskurse im Dreißigjährigen Krieg'.

<sup>52</sup> Sabine Mischner, 'Das Zeitregime des Krieges: Zeitpraktiken im Ersten Weltkrieg', in *Die Zukunft des 20. Jahrhunderts. Dimensionen einer Historischen Zukunftsforschung*, ed. Lucian Hölscher (Frankfurt, 2017).

<sup>53</sup> Fryxell, 'Time and the Modern'.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew S. Champion, 'The history of temporalities: an introduction', *Past & Present*, 243, no. 1 (2019), p. 250.

approach of pluritemporality in general and different layers of the future in particular. When approaching different futures diachronically, the historian of past futures is interested in the (co-)evolution and interaction of different futures over time, whereas the synchronic approach deals with the presence, coexistence and interaction of different futures in a specific moment in time.

Several recent studies have stressed the political nature of the interactions of different layers of time and modes of thinking about the future. Not coincidentally, two such works even have ‘time’ and ‘power’ in their respective title, in different orders. In his *Time and Power*, Christopher Clark looks into the ‘chronopolitics’ of four key political figures in German history: Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia, Frederick the Great, Otto von Bismarck and Adolf Hitler. Chronopolitics is ‘the study of how certain views toward time and toward the nature of change become implicated in processes of decision making’ and vice versa ‘enquiring after “the imagination of time and history” that has, in various countries and epochs, given “meaning and legitimacy” to the actions and arguments of the sovereign authority’.<sup>55</sup> In *Power and Time*, Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos and Natasha Wheatley put forward the concept of chronocenosism: ‘a way of theorizing not simply the multiplicity but also the conflict of temporal regimes operating in any given moment’. ‘Power and time interface amid intensely competitive temporal formations, and not simply parallel or layered ones’. Edelstein, Geroulanos and Wheatley argue that ‘power operates by arranging, managing, and scaling temporal regimes and conflicts’, while at the same time, ‘these fault lines function as seams of structural weakness and possibility: power is often undone in the cut and thrust of temporal antagonisms’.<sup>56</sup> A good example of such power is Rhys Jones’s study of the French Revolution where those who try to slow down the time of the revolution are denounced and pursued as traitors.<sup>57</sup> Another illustration of the interplay is how the different constellation of power in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalinist period produced a Soviet future discourse that differed from that of the West; the Soviet Union determined one future rather than choosing from a plurality of possible futures.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Clark, *Time and Power*, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley, *Power and Time*. pp. 3–4. See also: Margrit Pernau, ‘Chronocenosism: how to imagine the multiplicity of temporalities without losing the emphasis on power and conflict’, *History and Theory* online early.

<sup>57</sup> Rhys Jones, ‘Time warps during the French Revolution’, *Past & Present*, 254, no. 1 (2022). In political history, the connection between futures and power has become an important topic: Alexandra Paulin-Booth and Matthew Kerry, ‘Introduction – activist times: temporality and political action in twentieth-century Europe’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 28, no. 4 (2021); Elke Seefried, ed., *Politische Zukünfte im 20. Jahrhundert: Parteien, Bewegungen, Umbrüche* (Frankfurt, 2022); Elke Seefried, ‘Reconfiguring the future? Politics and time from the 1960s to the 1980s – introduction’, *Journal of Modern European History* 13, no. 3 (2015); Jenny Andersson and Anne-Greet Keizer, ‘Governing the future: science, policy and public participation in the construction of the long term in the Netherlands and Sweden’, *History and Technology* 30, no. 1–2 (2014).

<sup>58</sup> Stefan Guth, ‘One future only. The Soviet Union in the age of the scientific-technical revolution’, *Journal of Modern European History* 13, no. 3 (2015).

Jenny Andersson and Sandra Kemp define futures as ‘forms of representation that are products of a social struggle to give content to futures and set in course forms of social action’.<sup>59</sup> Here, the power dynamics become part of a social struggle, which Andersson documents for in her study of the intellectual and global history of future-making in the Post-Cold-War period.<sup>60</sup> Prediction is ‘powered social technology with ambitions to shape the world, manage social conflicts and create forms of order to the general messiness of social time’.<sup>61</sup> Scientific prediction gradually replaced religious beliefs about the future and closed the ‘dangerously open future’ produced by the *Sattelzeit*. Rational foresight and prediction became tools of power for the state and as such historians can analyse ‘the [historical] future as a source of power also for a secular age’.<sup>62</sup>

#### IV

Most histories of the future do not just reconstruct how people in the past envisioned futures, they also link people’s thoughts about the future to practices and actions.<sup>63</sup> Again, this strand of research heavily draws on Koselleck, who saw an intimate connection between concepts, temporal levels and the construction of political and social realities and described how these influenced human actions and decisions.<sup>64</sup> While the distinction between future-oriented actions and practices is a blurry one, the present paper broadly defines actions as carried out by an individual and practices as shared by a social group. Practices are often seen as reproducing and stabilising the social order, whereas actions, understood as the individual instance of a practice, can also deviate from a certain practice and might go as far as destroying the social order. Taking into account actions and practices lets us see the future as a ‘more or less experienced temporal category that actors produce and enact through future-making’ actions and practices. ‘These actions and practices involve both the mind and the body, and both the discursive and nondiscursive (i.e. bodily and material) dimensions of the ways in which actors engage with the future’.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Jenny Andersson and Sandra Kemp, ‘Introduction’, in *Futures*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Jenny Andersson (Oxford, 2021), p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> Jenny Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post Cold War Imagination* (Oxford, 2018).

<sup>61</sup> Jenny Andersson, ‘The future boardgame: prediction as power over time’, in *Futures*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Jenny Andersson (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> Andersson, *The Future of the World*, pp. 18–19; Seefried, ‘Geschichte der Zukunft’.

<sup>63</sup> Koselleck, *Sediments of Time*, p. 3; Seefried, ‘Geschichte der Zukunft’; Andersson and Kemp, ‘Introduction’, Clark, *Time and Power*; Edelstein, Geroulanos, and Wheatley, *Power and Time*; Jones, ‘Time Warps’; Graf, ‘Ignorance Is Bliss’, p. 94; Joris van Eijnatten and Pim Huijnen, ‘Something happened to the future: reconstructing temporalities in Dutch parliamentary debate, 1814–2018’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 16, no. 2 (2021), pp. 55–56.

<sup>64</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Here, we borrow from organisational sociology: Matthias Wenzel et al., ‘Future and organization studies: on the rediscovery of a problematic temporal category in organizations’, *Organization Studies* 41, no. 10 (2020), pp. 1443–4.

Both future-oriented actions and practices have been attested frequently throughout history. In previous times as well as in our current day and age, individuals have undertaken actions to achieve their personal goals or prevent anticipated disasters. In his study of future thinking in the Enlightenment, William Nelson, for instance, ‘emphasize[s] the agency of actions of historical actors in an attempt to demonstrate how people developed an active orientation towards the future’. For example, animal breeding and economic modelling helped generate a new disposition toward the future in the eighteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Just like psychologists have argued that people today think about the future because they believe they can change it, historians are interested in the mutual relationship between future thinking and actions in the past: ‘an undercurrent of the future runs through historical narratives; it is manifested in people’s thoughts, motivations, plans, and aspirations, which in turn guide their actions and behaviour.’<sup>67</sup> Lucian Hölscher goes as far as stating that without taking into account the future dimension, it is impossible to truly understand events of the past.

In his study of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), sociologist David R. Gibson meticulously unravels what he calls the foretalk (elaborating all the different possibilities and making decisions based on the consequences of paths and actions taken) by studying the transcriptions of the discussions between key players at the White House, such as President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamara. In doing so, Gibson ties the envisioned potential outcomes of uncertain futures to the actions that were taken when the mutual assured destruction between two nuclear powers was at stake.<sup>68</sup> Framing the relation between futures and the (historical) now in terms of steps from now to then is what Koselleck and Hölscher call the temporalisation of social life, a process that has started to take hold from the early modern period onwards.<sup>69</sup>

Historians of the future not only consider the actions following future thinking, they also study how societies generally dealt with the future.<sup>70</sup> To Rüdiger Graf and Benjamin Herzog, a history of the future should be understood as a history of the mental, linguistic and practical structures and procedures that frame how people referred to or produced the future.<sup>71</sup> A large German graduate programme based at the university

<sup>66</sup> William Max Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment: Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year One* (Toronto, 2021), p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Suddendorf, Redshaw, and Bulley, *The Invention of Tomorrow*; Hölscher, ‘Future-thinking: a historical perspective’, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> D. R. Gibson, ‘Speaking of the Future: contentious narration during the Cuban Missile Crisis’, *Qualitative Sociology* 34, no. 4 (2011); D. R. Gibson, *Talk at the Brink: Deliberation and Decision During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Princeton, 2012). In sociology, future thinking has become an important topic as well. For a good overview: Lisa Suckert, ‘Back to the Future’.

<sup>69</sup> Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 26–42 (Historia magistra vitae: the dissolution of the topos into the perspective of a modernized historical process); Hölscher, ‘Virtual Historiography’, p. 32.

<sup>70</sup> Simon and Tamm, ‘Historical Futures’.

<sup>71</sup> Rüdiger Graf and Benjamin Herzog, ‘Von der Geschichte der Zukunftsvorstellungen zur Geschichte ihrer Generierung: Probleme und Herausforderungen des Zukunftsbezugs im 20. Jahrhundert’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 42, no. 3 (2016), p. 504.

of Duisburg-Essen titled ‘Precaution, foresight, prediction. Coping with contingency through future action’ focused on these praxeological approaches to the history of the future. Such future practices include calculating risks, making predictions, planning an individual career or developing alternative scenarios.<sup>72</sup> Archiving, remembering and writing, for instance, are examples of such future-oriented historical practices.<sup>73</sup> Other examples that yield insights into the perception of the future are histories of risk, such as in premodern marine insurance or weather forecasting in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States.<sup>74</sup>

Cultural historian Peter Burke has pointed out that historians of ideas such as Koselleck and Hölscher overlook ‘particular assumptions about the future that were linked to social practices’. According to Burke, these social practices are focussed more on the near future, are more pragmatic in nature and grow more frequent in the early modern period, as is evidenced by the emergence of, among others, wills to benefit one’s children, contraception, estate management, calculations of population sizes in the future, military strategies, the rise of government statistics or marine and life insurance. This sense of the future should not be confused with the ‘general vision of a more distant future’ that was of interest to Koselleck and Hölscher.<sup>75</sup> Historians of the historical futures ideally combine studies of practices and actions with theories of historical futures. This can lay bare frictions between the two, and perhaps this leads to the questioning of the timing of shifts in the perception of the future.

Including actions and practices into the framework also ties in with the conception of future pasts as multi-layered phenomena. As Alexandra Walsham argues, providence and prevention coexisted in the minds of early modern people as ways to deal with major events: ‘accepting a providential explanation for a devastating blaze or flood did not preclude the development of formal preventive measures, building by-laws, fire-fighting equipment, and other damage-limitation techniques. “Religious” interpretations and “rationalist” reactions were by no means

<sup>72</sup> [https://www.uni-due.de/graduierntenkolleg\\_1919/grako1919-start.php](https://www.uni-due.de/graduierntenkolleg_1919/grako1919-start.php). The program produced a series of six edited volumes between 2016 and 2019 on different topics (uncertainty of the future, enabling or preventing certain futures, adventures and risks, horizons of possibility, intentions plans and strategies and on forms of practices underpinning future action in the past) and different historical periods. For future practices: Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Zukunftspraktiken: Die Zeitlichkeit des Sozialen und die Krise der Modernen Rationalisierung der Zukunft’, in *Kreativität und Soziale Praxis* (Bielefeld, 2016), p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Jan-Hendryk de Boer, ed., *Praxisformen. Zur kulturellen Logik von Zukunftshandeln* (Frankfurt, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin Scheller, ‘Die Geburt des Risikos. Kontingenz und kaufmännische Praxis im mediterranen Seehandel des Hoch- und Spätmittelalters’, in *Historische Zeitschrift* 304 (2017), pp. 305–31; Benjamin Scheller, ed., *Kulturen des Risikos im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019; Giovanni Ceccarelli, *Risky Markets: Marine Insurance in Renaissance Florence*, vol. 8, *Brill’s Studies in Maritime History* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Jeroen Puttevils and Marc Deloof, ‘Marketing and pricing risk in marine insurance in sixteenth-century Antwerp’, *The Journal of Economic History* 77, no. 3 (2017); Jamie L. Pietruska, *Prediction and Uncertainty in Modern America* (Chicago, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Burke, ‘The history of the future’; Hölscher, ‘The discovery of the future in early modern Europe’.

incompatible'.<sup>76</sup> Matthew O'Hara's history of the future in colonial Mexico stresses that creative future making usually did not take place through the occasional, radical idea, but through common, everyday practices. These everyday practices could be the confessions of the faithful, stargazing, lending and borrowing money, or the political rhetoric at the very end of Mexico's Ancien Régime at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yet, as O'Hara concedes, concepts of the future are not always easily separable from the practices that activated them and vice versa.<sup>77</sup>

There often is a big gap between histories of future thinking and histories of future practices.<sup>78</sup> The advantage of including actions and practices related to future thinking allows connections with historiographical strands that can also benefit from synergies with histories of the future. Historians have always had an interest in prophecies, prognostications, dreams and mantic arts, and this has produced a fruitful historiography.<sup>79</sup> It is not a stretch to include such histories into histories of the future. Green-Mercado, for example, shows how Morisco communities made use of prophecies, messianism and apocalypticism to foster support for their cause at the French royal court at the beginning of the seventeenth century.<sup>80</sup> Histories of utopias and dystopias also have strong connections with histories of the future, especially because utopia developed from a place into a time in the future.<sup>81</sup> Other future-oriented practices include prevention, for instance of fire or natural disasters, or the early modern idea of projects.<sup>82</sup> Tied to prevention is the history of the concept of risk, which, in turn, is

<sup>76</sup> Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), p. 148.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew D. O'Hara, *The History of the Future in Colonial Mexico* (New Haven, 2018).

<sup>78</sup> This is argued in Klaus Oschema and Bernd Schneidmüller, eds., *Zukunft im Mittelalter. Zeitkonzepte und Planungsstrategien* (Ostfildern, 2021). See also: Cornel Zwierlein, ed., *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400-1800* (Leiden, 2016), p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Georges Minois, *Histoire de l'avenir, des prophètes à la prospective* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); Klaus Herbers and Hans-Christian Lehner, *Dreams, Nature, and Practices as Signs of the Future in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2022); Matthias Heiduk, Klaus Herbers, and Hans-Christian Lehner, *Prognostication in the Medieval World* (Berlin, Boston, 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Mayte Green-Mercado, 'Morisco prophecies at the French court (1602-1607)', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 1-2 (2018). Other examples of how prophecies about the future could influence political decisions: Cornell H. Fleischer, 'A Mediterranean apocalypse: prophecies of empire in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61, no. 1-2 (2018); Victoria Flood, *Prophecy, Politics and Place in Medieval England from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas of Erceuldoune* (Woodbridge, 2016). See also the publications of the comparative project on prognostication in Europe and East Asia: Fate, Freedom and Prognostication uni-erlangen.de.

<sup>81</sup> Lucian Hölscher, 'Utopie', *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996).

<sup>82</sup> Cornel Zwierlein, *Prometheus Tamed: Fire, Security, and Modernities, 1400 to 1900* (Leiden, 2021); Nicolai Hannig, *Kalkulierte Gefahren: Naturkatastrophen Und Vorsorge Seit 1800* (Wallstein, 2019); Eric H. Ash, *The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building in Early Modern England* (Baltimore, 2017); Koji Yamamoto, *Taming Capitalism before Its Triumph: Public Service, Distrust and 'Projecting' in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2018); Frédéric Graber and Martin Giraudeau, eds., *Les projets. Une histoire politique (XVIIe-XXIe siècles)* (Paris, 2018).

connected to future thinking.<sup>83</sup> And there is also recent and fascinating work on the history of futurology and future studies, on the production of futures in the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup>

## V

Histories of the future rely on a wide diversity of sources, from texts to images to material objects. The following, non-exhaustive list cannot possibly do justice to the diversity used and the creativity displayed by historians: letters, diaries, calendars, almanacs, guidebooks on purchasing real estate, arithmetic textbooks, philosophical tracts, statistical tables, biographies and autobiographies, narrations of dreams, poems, plays, wills, petitions, royal edicts, mirrors for princes, apocalyptic texts, prophecies, newspapers and magazines, archival documents on urban and military planning, political party programs, parliamentary reports and deliberations, diplomatic reports, medieval literary texts, sci-fi novels, short stories, game boards such as ‘The Future’ (1966), playing cards and fortune telling devices, paintings, sculptures such as those on the tympani of medieval cathedrals, ... What should clearly be encouraged is the analysis of visual sources and the futures they contain, whether they be depictions of the Final Judgement in the work of Flemish painters of the fifteenth century<sup>85</sup>, in the metaphors and visual language used in sixteenth-century Italian paintings and prints<sup>86</sup> or the French artist’s Jean-Marc Côté’s images of the year 2000 produced at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century.<sup>87</sup> In any case, these sources only reveal a fraction of all potential past futures since many of such futures will never have made it into a historical source.

Recent work also distances itself from relying too much on canonical texts written by men from the elite, whether they be Augustinus, Montaigne or Kant.<sup>88</sup> This makes one wonder whether their understanding of the future can and should be applied uniformly to their contemporaries.<sup>89</sup> This is especially the case since anthropologist Arjun

<sup>83</sup> Lorraine J. Daston, ‘The domestication of risk: mathematical probability and insurance 1650–1830’, in *The Probabilistic Revolution*, ed. Lorenz Krüger (Cambridge, 1987); Gerda Reith, ‘Uncertain times: the notion of ‘risk’ and the development of modernity’, *Time & Society* 13, no. 2–3 (2004); Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Harvard, 2014).

<sup>84</sup> Andersson, *The Future of the World*, Jenny Andersson, ‘The great future debate and the struggle for the world’, *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012); Elke Seefried, *Zukunftfe: Aufstieg und Krise der Zukunftsforschung 1945–1980* (Berlin, 2015); Seefried, ‘Geschichte der Zukunft’.

<sup>85</sup> Champion, *The Fullness of Time*, pp. 64–89.

<sup>86</sup> Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden, 2014). Baker, *In Fortune’s Theater*, pp. 152–221.

<sup>87</sup> The Visions of the Future project has brought together a fascinating collection of visions of the future from Britain, America, and Australia in visual culture from 1800–1914: <https://www.visionsofthefuture.co.uk>.

<sup>88</sup> Recently, Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* bases its analysis on such texts.

<sup>89</sup> This point is also made in Zwierlein, ed., *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400–1800*, 5. The written works of intellectuals are still being used in new histories of the future: Kyrre



Appadurai has shown how even today the capacity to anticipate the future is socially differentiated; not everyone has access to the same future as a cultural reservoir.<sup>90</sup> Much in the same vein, Alexandra Walsham has emphasised how the concept of providence was more prominent among the protestant elite in early modern England, while the majority of people mixed it with lingering folk cultural elements like fate and fairies.<sup>91</sup>

## VI

There are many roads into histories of the future. For twentieth-century German history, Elke Seefried has identified the following approaches: histories of concepts and ideas, histories of science, knowledge and technology, histories of social and political action, discourse analysis and praxeology, post-colonial futures and interdisciplinary impulses (literature studies, futurology, sociology).<sup>92</sup> Historians of past futures usually amalgamate a range of different texts which they subject to close, critical reading. There is a spectrum in the scale and scope of works on histories of the future between a snapshot of one moment in time and a panoramic overview of future thinking in the *longue durée*. On the former end of the spectrum, Rhys Jones describes the ‘time warp’ of 10 August 1792 in Paris. Jones combines the history of lived experience, studies of metahistorical trends (like Koselleck) and micro-history.<sup>93</sup> The Cuban Missile Crisis offers a similar ‘information-rich environment’.<sup>94</sup> Sociologist Ann Mische, who analysed a large series of documents pertaining to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, described the conference as a ‘site of hyperprojectivity’, a site of heightened, future-oriented public debate about possible futures.<sup>95</sup> On the latter end of the spectrum, historians like Koselleck and Hölscher have favoured more broad strokes and panoramic views running over several centuries in which they demarcate different periods and moments of change from one dominant mode of future thinking to another. They single out authors whose texts are either allegedly typical, even canonical today, for the period or are indicative of the shift.

A new line in the historical research of past futures uses distant reading methods to investigate large text corpora. Javier Fernández-Sebastián observed a relative increase of the word ‘*el porvenir*’ (the future) between

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Kverndokk, ‘The end of the world: from the Lisbon earthquake to the last days’, in *Conceptualizing the World: An Exploration across Disciplines*, ed. Helge Jordheim and Erling Sandmo (Berghahn, 2019); Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment*.

<sup>90</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London, 2013).

<sup>91</sup> Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*.

<sup>92</sup> Seefried, ‘Geschichte der Zukunft’.

<sup>93</sup> Jones, ‘Time Warps’.

<sup>94</sup> Gibson, ‘Speaking of the future’.

<sup>95</sup> Ann Mische, ‘Measuring futures in action: projective grammars in the Rio + 20 debates’, *Theory and Society* 43, no. 3–4 (2014).

1830 and 1840 in Spanish publications of the Google Books corpus.<sup>96</sup> Joris van Eijnatten and Pim Huijnen used the 800 million words corpus of Dutch parliamentary speeches (1814–2018) to investigate changes in the meaning of the word ‘future’ and comparable terms. The quantitative and diachronic analysis is interspersed with interpretations of particular sentences containing future. Other key terms of which the chronology and frequency is discussed are as follows: (un)predictability, scenario, prognosis, makeability, planning, change and development. By means of this large-scale analysis, they found that the 1970s were a key moment of change: the future became less predictable, and time became more uncontrollable.<sup>97</sup>

Whether one looks at the frequency of certain future-related keywords in a large corpus or prefers a detailed dissection and annotation of the grammar or the narrative structures in the texts of a debate, ultimately the historian of past futures is subjected to the language of the source.<sup>98</sup> Lucian Hölscher has based his history of past futures partly on grammar and the presence of certain key words. According to Hölscher, many European languages – like English, French and German – originally did not have a future tense for verbs and when (and if) they developed it was borrowed from Latin. Only in the early modern period did words like *avenir* and *Zukunft* acquire the meaning of the future as a period of time yet to come.<sup>99</sup> Hölscher relies on the hypothesis of linguistic determinism, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: language determines thought. This strong assertion has been disproven in favour of its lighter variant, linguistic relativity.<sup>100</sup> In the case of the future, Hölscher posits that without the necessary words or verb conjugations, people before the seventeenth century could not conceive of the future in its modern guise.<sup>101</sup> There are, however, many terms that explicitly refer to the future: hope, longing

<sup>96</sup> Fernández-Sebastián, ‘A world in the making’, pp. 125–6.

<sup>97</sup> van Eijnatten and Huijnen, ‘Something happened to the future’. Another example of this distant reading approach is Risto Turunen, ‘Macroscoping the sun of socialism: distant readings of temporality in Finnish labour newspapers, 1895–1917’, in *Digital Histories: Emergent Approaches within the New Digital History*, ed. Mats Fridlund and et al (Helsinki, 2020).

<sup>98</sup> Kiening, ‘Hybride Zeiten’, 229–30.

<sup>99</sup> Hölscher, ‘The history of the future. The emergence and decline of a temporal concept’, p. 10; Hölscher, ‘Future-thinking: a historical perspective’, 17; Hölscher, ‘The discovery of the future in early modern Europe’.

<sup>100</sup> Ekkehart Malotki, *Hopi Time: A Linguistic Analysis of the Temporal Concepts in the Hopi Language* (Berlin, 1983); John McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language* (Oxford, 2014); Lera Boroditsky, ‘Does language shape thought?: Mandarin and English speakers’ conceptions of time’, *Cognitive Psychology* 43, no. 1 (2001).

<sup>101</sup> However, Bernd Mahr, whom Hölscher quotes, argues that referencing the future in fact precedes language and actions. Bernd Mahr, ‘Modelle der Bezugnahme auf Zukünftiges’, in *Representing the Future: Zur Kulturellen Logik der Zukunft*, ed. Hartmann Andreas and Murawska Oliwia (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015); Hölscher, ‘The discovery of the future in early modern Europe’, p. 98. Martyna Urbaniak, using the family memoirs of the fifteenth-century Florentine Buonaccorso Pitti, has shown that when future verb tenses are being used, this use may be highly specific and unlike modern Italian grammatical functions. ‘Futuro e famiglia nei Ricordi di Bonaccorso Pitti’, in *Futuro Italiano: Scritture del tempo a venire*, ed. Alessandro Benassi, Fabrizio Bondi, and Serena Pezzini (Lucca, 2015).

for, dreaming of, wishing, anticipate, fear, look forward to and worry about. We can envisage, plan, design, anticipate, intend, aim and steer towards future actions, but we can also prophesise, announce, proclaim, reveal, forecast, predict or foretell.<sup>102</sup> If a grammatical future tense is not available, we can still talk about the time to come by using simple markers of time like ‘tomorrow’ or ‘next year’. This overview is just the tip of the iceberg because future events and aspirations can be linguistically expressed in a myriad of ways that are subject to regional and, of course, chronological variation. In that respect, historians of the future have a lot to learn from the field of historical linguistics, where the diachronic evolution of future markers and other makers of attitudes towards (future) events are generally well studied.<sup>103</sup>

The language problem even transcends the level of literal expression of the future. Does the historian of future pasts need explicit mentioning of the future in the sources?<sup>104</sup> Should the past future have a precise timescale or can the historian read between the lines and find implicit futures?<sup>105</sup> Working with textual sources, the historian of the future has to ‘start out from language and try to reach something which is not language; then [return] to language from that something which is not language’.<sup>106</sup> There is a risk of extrapolating our modern-day concepts of time and the future onto the past. We might infer future projections where they are not actually there or distort the ones that are present. While historians of the past future should certainly be aware of this, a strict interpretation of such a caution would signify the end of history as a discipline. Moreover, if the word future is actually used in a historical text, it would also be impossible to know what was actually meant by the author who wrote it. Perhaps the lively field of history of the emotions, which deals with similar methodological problems because of the difficult linkage between emotions and emotion words in texts, might serve as a source of inspiration.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Graf and Herzog, ‘Von der Geschichte der Zukunftsvorstellungen’, p. 502. A recent anthropological overview distinguishes between many of these different forms. Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future, New Departures in Anthropology* (Cambridge, 2019).

<sup>103</sup> For example: Sara Budts and Peter Petré, ‘Reading the intentions of be going to: on the subjectification of future markers’, *Folia linguistica historica* 37, no. 1 (2016); Anthony Harvey, *How Linguistics Can Help the Historian* (Royal Irish Academy, 2021).

<sup>104</sup> Hölscher asserts that the historian can only use explicit references to the future: deadlines, successive steps towards the future, dated future events, future scenarios. Hölscher, ‘The discovery of the future in early modern Europe’, p. 98.

<sup>105</sup> Sociologists of the future have to deal with the same problem Wenzel et al., ‘Future and Organization studies: on the rediscovery of a problematic temporal category in organizations’, p. 1451.

<sup>106</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present* (New York, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> Katie Barclay, ‘State of the field: the history of emotions’, *History* 106, no. 371 (2021); Barbara H. Rosenwein, ‘Problems and methods in the history of emotions’, *Passions in Context* 1, no. 1 (2010); Margrit Pernau, *Emotions and Temporalities* (Cambridge, 2021).

## VII

The social sciences too offer valuable insights when it comes to future-thinking. Sociologist Lisa Suckert recently provided an inspiring overview of the growing interest in the salience of future perceptions for social actions. Taking into account future perceptions has already shed new light on key themes in sociology such as inequality, social stratification, identity and social roles, the reflexivity of social action and agency, collective sense making and social coordination, power and conflict, and innovation and change.<sup>108</sup> An example of this developing strand of sociological research is Jens Beckert's work which shows how capitalist systems are explicitly aimed at a future, full of opportunities and risk.<sup>109</sup> The key part of Beckert's theory of capitalism is the concept of a fictional expectation. Economic actors, such as consumers, investors and corporations, develop fictional expectations of the future and assess how their decisions in the present, informed by those very future expectations, will determine the future. Financial markets, or 'temporal markets' as Elena Esposito calls them, are an interesting field of observation of anticipatory practices.<sup>110</sup> Sociologist of time and the future Barbara Adam puts her work on our current views of the future in a long-term perspective; this synthesis offers much to think about for the historian of futures (the roles of experts in the constructions of futures, power dynamics in future-making).<sup>111</sup> Sociologists, like historians writing from the experience of the crises we face now, focus on critical moments. Suckert argues that this puts daily life into the shadows.<sup>112</sup> Anthropology, by paying attention to mundane but not unimportant everyday practices of anticipation, seems to be less affected by this tendency.<sup>113</sup> Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight combine philosophical insights on anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope and destiny with ethnographical case studies of daily

<sup>108</sup> Suckert, 'Back to the future'.

<sup>109</sup> Beckert, J., *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Jens Beckert and Richard Bronk, eds., *Uncertain Futures: Imaginaries, Narratives, and Calculation in the Economy* (Oxford, 2018). There is an economic history project that deals with expectations in the nineteenth and twentieth century: PP 1859 'Experience & Expectation'! | SPP1859 (experience-expectation.de) Philipp Robinson Rössner investigates the connections between capitalism and the open future in the early modern period, relying on descriptions of the economy in *Managing the Wealth of Nations. Political Economies of Change in Preindustrial Europe* (Bristol, 2023), ch. 2. He argues that future orientation in cameralism actually preceded capitalism. Jonathan Levy gives a prominent role to future income and value in his definitions of capital and capitalism: Jonathan Levy, 'Capital as Process and the History of Capitalism', *Business History Review* 91, no. 3 (2017); Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (New York, 2021).

<sup>110</sup> Elena Esposito, *The Future of Futures: The Time of Money in Financing and Society* (Cheltenham, 2011).

<sup>111</sup> Barbara Elisabeth Adam and Christopher Robert Groves, *Future Matters: Action, Knowledge, Ethics, The Study of Time* (Leiden, 2007); Barbara Adam, 'History of the future: paradoxes and challenges', *Rethinking History* 14, no. 3 (2010).

<sup>112</sup> Suckert, 'Back to the future', pp. 418–9.

<sup>113</sup> Juan Francisco Salazar et al., eds., *Anthropologies and Futures: Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds* (London, 2017).

life where these future orientations become apparent. They show that future orientations can lead to dynamic planning but also to apathy, disillusion and fatigue.<sup>114</sup>

## VIII

Key problems of the historiography on the history of the future remain the limited theorisation of (1) the relationships between the future thinking of certain individuals, groups and whole societies; (2) the definitions and relationships of future practices, actions and future thinking; and (3) the differences between near, mid- and long-term futures. Much of the historiography remains Eurocentric as well.

To what extent is, say, Condorcet's thinking about the future representative for the whole of the French population at that time? Should we not be more careful to jump from an individual's future to a societal one?<sup>115</sup> Is the advent of marine insurance the trigger of a new period in the history of the future? How do ideas of the future spread between individuals, groups and societies?<sup>116</sup> Do practices predominantly deal with the near future?<sup>117</sup> Is the observation by sociologists that the distant future appears to belong to the most privileged actors who can afford to make plans also true for the past?<sup>118</sup> Only with a better theoretical frame can we integrate the different brands in the literature that developed in parallel fashion since Koselleck. Crucially, this new theoretical frame should be thoroughly informed by actual case studies of past futures, of how they were constructed, experienced and practiced.<sup>119</sup> The frame put forward by Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Marek Tamm, which is based on transitions in future thinking, anticipatory practices and registers of time, scale, value and knowledge can take the research a step further.<sup>120</sup>

Ideally, histories of the future continue in expanding geographically, into global histories of the future.<sup>121</sup> Postcolonial scholars such as Deepesh Chakrabarty or Arjun Appadurai stress that the future is directly

<sup>114</sup> Bryant and Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future*. Roberto Poli has recently put together an interdisciplinary approach to anticipation: Roberto Poli, *Introduction to Anticipation Studies* (Springer, 2017), Roberto Poli, ed., *Handbook of Anticipation: Theoretical and Applied Aspects of the Use of Future in Decision Making* (Springer, 2020).

<sup>115</sup> This is problematised by Graf and Herzog, 'Von der Geschichte der Zukunftsvorstellungen', p. 499.

<sup>116</sup> Bernhardt et al. stress that we should not work from abstract collectives, but from actors and practices. Markus Bernhardt et al., eds., *Möglichkeitshorizonte: Zur Pluralität von Zukunftserwartungen und Handlungsoptionen in der Geschichte, Kontingenzgeschichten* (Frankfurt, 2018), p. 10.

<sup>117</sup> Herbers, *Prognostik und Zukunft Im Mittelalter* stresses a distinction between long-term (historical theologies) and short-term (immediate, pragmatic) futures.

<sup>118</sup> Suckert, 'Back to the future', p. 404.

<sup>119</sup> Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt, 'Revolution and eternity. Introductory remarks on fascist temporalities', *Journal of Modern European History* 13, no. 1 (2015), p. 25.

<sup>120</sup> Simon and Tamm, 'Historical futures'.

<sup>121</sup> Andersson, *The Future of the World*, Andersson; 'The great future debate'; Harun Küçük, 'The bureaucratic sense of the forthcoming in seventeenth-century Istanbul', *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2020).

wound up with geopolitical notions of world and world order.<sup>122</sup> François Hartog wrote: ‘the West has spent the last two hundred years dancing to the tune of the future – and making others do likewise’.<sup>123</sup> Aljoscha Tillmanns and Claudia Berger have studied future-oriented practices in the twentieth-century history of South-Africa.<sup>124</sup> Several recent research projects take histories of the future to the global level.<sup>125</sup> Shahzad Bashir’s digital project, uniting text with images in a web-like structure, looks into the relation between Islam and temporality, including ‘articulations of futures in Islamic materials, concentrating on the perceived relationship between bygone and forthcoming time’ which he ties to actions. Exploring the long stretch of time between Muhammad and today, using historical texts, literature, art and architecture, music videos and almanacs, to name but a few of his sources, and taking examples from the global Muslim world, Bashir’s *A New Vision for Islamic Pasts and Futures* provides a pluritemporal image of Islamic history in the form of a web and goes against western attempts to ‘timeline’ this history.<sup>126</sup> Studies such as Bashir’s show how we can overcome the still Eurocentric frame of histories of the future. A more gendered approach in histories of the future is a worthwhile pursuit too. As Mary Wiesner-Hanks has argued in an edited volume that ‘time is an embodied aspect of human existence, but also mediated by culture; experiences and understandings of time change ...; time is gendered and also structured by other social hierarchies’. Women have often been determined by their reproductive capacities, which were usually linked to future and time.<sup>127</sup>

Overall, it could be wondered what we would gain by including ‘the future’ in the historian’s toolbox. Roxanne Panchasi summarises this neatly: ‘the future anticipated at a certain historical moment tells us a lot about the preoccupations at that moment’.<sup>128</sup> Although many plans, visions and speculations did not materialise in the end – a powerful reminder of the contingency of history – they are of serious interest because ‘they formed the thoughts and defined the actions of political actors and large population groups in their time. This is how they became factors of historical processes, both in terms of prognostics and in

<sup>122</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Anthropocene time’, *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (2018); Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*.

<sup>123</sup> Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, p. xviii.

<sup>124</sup> Claudia Berger, *Die >Zwischenzeit< Der Kapkolonie 1902–1910* (Berlin, Boston, 2023); Aljoscha Tillmanns, *Development for Liberation. M.G. Buthelezi’s and Inkatha’s Initiatives Towards a Different South Africa, 1975–1994* (2020).

<sup>125</sup> Fate, Freedom and Prognostication & Fate, Freedom and Prognostication: Strategies for Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe & International Research Training Group “Temporalities of Future”.

<sup>126</sup> Shahzad Bashir, *A New Vision for Islamic Pasts and Futures* (Boston, 2022); Shahzad Bashir, ‘Composing history for the web: digital reformulation of narrative, evidence, and context’, *History and Theory* 61, no. 4 (2022).

<sup>127</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, ‘Introduction’, in *Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Amsterdam, 2018), p. 14.

<sup>128</sup> Roxanne Panchasi, *Future Tense: The Culture of Anticipation in France between the Wars*, (Ithaca, 2009), p. 4.

terms of pragmatics'.<sup>129</sup> Considering past futures can help us understand people's motivations, decisions and actions.<sup>130</sup> An attention to past futures also makes the historian aware of potential teleological biases: we can know what happened in the futures of historical actors, but these actors might have had other expectations of their respective futures.

It is not a coincidence that the renewed attention for histories of the futures comes at a time that is described as a period of crisis, or even crises, from a world that is facing life- and society-threatening phenomena like climate change, a pandemic, an economic recession, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, growing worries about artificial intelligence and a turn to authoritarianism.<sup>131</sup> Several authors emphasise that histories of the future might inform our own quest for a renewed sense of temporal direction.<sup>132</sup> Or is this our current chronocentrism talking and do histories of the future exactly illustrate the relativity of this feeling?

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/1468-229X.13389>

<sup>129</sup> Hölscher, 'Virtual historiography', p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> On motivations in historical actors: Ramsay MacMullen, *Why Do We Do What We Do?* (Berlin, 2014).

<sup>131</sup> Josep Maria Antentas, 'Notes on corona crisis and temporality', *Dialectical Anthropology* 44, no. 3 (2020); Allegra Fryxell, 'Afterword: the human scale of time and the influenza pandemic of 1918', in *Time on a Human Scale: Experiencing the Present in Europe, 1860-1930*, ed. Julian Wright and Allegra Fryxell (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>132</sup> See the Iterations section in the issues of *History & Theory* from 2021 onwards. Patricia Vieira, 'What future for the future? Utopian Lessons from a Global Pandemic', in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile (London, 2022).