

BEYOND HISTORICISM: UTOPIAN THOUGHT IN THE “CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION”

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The “Conservative Revolution” presents a paradox to contemporary scholars, as the idea of a revolution seems to challenge the very foundations of conservatism. “Conservative Revolution” is a colligatory concept; it does not refer to any particular historical event but to a current in intellectual thought that gained prominence in the German Weimar Republic.¹ Comprising a broad array of right-wing authors, thinkers, and movements, the concept of “Conservative Revolution” was introduced as an analytical category by Armin Mohler in his dissertation *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland* (1949). He defined it as “that spiritual movement of regeneration that tried to clear away the ruins of the nineteenth century and tried to create a new order of life.”² Covering *völkisch* authors, Young Conservatives such as Oswald Spengler and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, National Revolutionaries — like brothers Ernst and Friedrich Georg Jünger — and also two more organized movements, the Landvolkbewegung and the Bündische Jugend, Mohler presented a taxonomy of a heterogeneous array of thinkers and organizations that did not regard itself as a unified movement but shared a common attitude to life, society, and politics.

Because this attitude comprised a rejection of core values, ideologies, and theories (such as rationalism, liberalism, and capitalism) that dominated nineteenth-century politics, historians have mainly focused on the Conservative Revolution’s opaque relationship to modernity, with an emphasis on its political consequences. These analyses have often treated the Conservative Revolution as an oxymoron. To Jeffrey Herf, for example, the backward-looking rejection of modernity combined with the embrace of technology generated a *Weltanschauung* peculiar to the Conservative Revolution and Nazism, which he tried to capture in the notion of “reactionary modernism.”³ According to Stefan Breuer, the Conservative Revolution was not really conservative, as its proponents saw the dissolution of the premodern world as an irreversible fact and did not argue for its restoration. They did, however, imagine a great variety of German futures—the only consensus being the overall rejection of political liberalism as a force alien to the German soul.⁴ The absence of “real” conservatism combined with the lack of coherence in its political and social imagination caused Breuer

1 Colligatory concepts are concepts used by historians to create unity in the morass of past ideas and events; they bring them together under a general metaphor such as “Renaissance,” “Industrial Revolution,” or, indeed, “Conservative Revolution.” See William H. Walsh, “Colligatory Concepts in History,” in *The Philosophy of History*, ed. Patrick L. Gardiner, 127–44 (Oxford, 1974).

2 Armin Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932. Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt, 1972), xxviii. Translation cited from Keith Bullivant, “The Conservative Revolution,” in *The Weimar Dilemma: Intellectuals in the Weimar Republic*, ed. Anthony Phelan, 47–70 (Manchester, 1985), 47.

3 Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1985).

4 Stefan Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution* (Darmstadt, 2005), 180–81.

to dispose of the concept altogether in favor of the notion of “new nationalism.” Peter Osborne, discussing the conceptions of time and history of the Conservative Revolution, goes even further in claiming a particular modernism for it. In its radical rejection of modernity, Osborne argues, the Conservative Revolution could not but reaffirm the central tenet of modernity — its understanding of time as a linear progression. Regardless of whether its images of the future were derived from mythology or some primordial national essence, the fact was that by radically rejecting modernity, the Conservative Revolution actually resorted to the temporal logic of modernity, which pits a new stage in history against an old one in a logic of progression. The fact that Conservative Revolutionaries dressed up their expectations of the future as “return” or “recovery” is a simple misrepresentation of their own modernism, according to Osborne.⁵

The scholarly discussion on the extent to which the Conservative Revolution was modern or not opens up the possibility of an analysis of its utopian dimension, especially if we agree with Peter Fritzsche that the Weimar Republic was an era with an open horizon, a “workshop” in which “more or less fierce versions of the future were constructed” rather than an era that was characterized by the birth and fall of democracy.⁶ It was in this context — born out of the traumatic experience of a devastating, lost war that triggered the unforeseen political, economic, and social destabilization of Germany — that the Conservative Revolution opened up a mode of imagining the future that relied on a radical rejection of the present. As Osborne rightly indicates, an understanding of its imagination of the future needs to be paired with a study of its understanding of time. However, we may question Osborne’s assessment that the Conservative Revolution was a modern phenomenon because it supposedly echoed modernity’s progressivism by longing for a new future. If we agree with Wolfgang Reinhart that the “modern period” was the only era that truly existed as it was the only one that thought of itself historically, then the Conservative Revolution can only be modern if it imagined the future as a new *historical* era. But it is the question of to what extent the Conservative Revolution does this.⁷ Therefore, in this essay I will discuss its utopianism by analyzing the conceptions of history that underlie its imaginations of the future. I treat conceptions of history as assumptions of the relationship between the three temporal dimensions of past, present, and future on which imaginations of either of those dimensions implicitly or explicitly rely.⁸ I will not focus closely on the *contents* of the future imagination of the Conservative Revolution, as existing literature pays

5 Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London, 1995), 167.

6 Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 3 (1996): 629–56, here 656.

7 Wolfgang Reinhart, “The Idea of Early Modern History,” in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley, 268–79 (New York, 1997), 278.

8 Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited,” in *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, ed. Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever, 73–89 (London, 2017), 81, doi:10.1057/978-1-137-52908-4_4.

sufficient attention to notions such as *Volk*, *Rasse*, *Reich*, *Gemeinschaft*, and *Technik*, around which such imaginations evolved,⁹ but I will look at the temporalities that inform such notions.

The Conservative Revolution and the Crisis of Historicism

In the temporal sense one of the main tenets of the Conservative Revolution was the rejection of belief in progress. This disbelief was largely rooted in the experiences of the First World War, infused by the fall of the German Empire and the subsequent revolution and hyperinflation that uprooted the old social order and demanded the installation of a new one. But the rejection of progress was also intellectually rooted as it built on a longer tradition of critique of the modern conception of history. This critique can be traced back to the last decades of the nineteenth century and reached its peak after the First World War in the so-called crisis of historicism.

Historicism is a broad term that has been used in many ways, but generally the concept appears in reference to either the Rankean school of historical thought or to the broader modern conception of history of which Rankean historicism is only one expression. Karl Mannheim called this the “worldview” of historicism, which refers to the all-encompassing understanding that all human values and ideas are historically conditioned and can only be understood as such.¹⁰ As a worldview, historicism was — and perhaps still is — an inescapable precondition of modern existence, an idea widely shared in bourgeois circles in the Weimar Era.¹¹ According to Kurt Nowak, this worldview revolved around the notion of individuality, on the one hand, and continuity, on the other. As individuality referred to the uniqueness of individual and collective historical actors and ages, it functioned as a precondition for the experience of change and otherness and, thus, for the experience of historical distance. The otherwise atomized individual entities were brought together by understanding their relationship in terms of continuity. Historiography is only one example of the many ways in which modern historical cultures configure coherence out of discontinuities.

The “crisis of historicism” roughly spans the decades between 1880 and 1930, with Friedrich Nietzsche as one of the early critics of German historical culture. His *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* [On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life] (1874) furthered a sharp critique of historicism as a worldview, which — Nietzsche claimed — would effectively mean the end of

9 See, for example, Breuer, *Anatomie der konservativen Revolution*; Volker Weiß, *Moderne Antimoderne: Arthur Moeller van den Bruck und der Wandel des Konservatismus* (Paderborn, 2012); Mohler, *Die konservative Revolution in Deutschland*.

10 Karl Mannheim, “Historicism,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, 84–133 (London, 1952), 85.

11 Friedrich Jaeger, “Theorietypen der Krise des Historismus,” in *Die Historismusdebatte in Der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Wolfgang Bialas and Gérard Raulet, 52–70 (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 52.



Oswald Spengler.
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history if it were to grasp of all aspects of life. If mankind understands itself purely in historical terms, as the product of a historically evolved society, the demands put forward by history create a burden for individuals to act creatively and obstruct putting history in the service of life.¹²

In the Conservative Revolution, Oswald Spengler's *Untergang des Abendlandes* [The Decline of the West] (1918) struck a significant blow to historicism. Or — better put — the book took followed the logic of historicism to its ultimate conclusion. In his book, Spengler provided a comparative morphology of eight civilizations, with an emphasis on the Classical (Greco-Roman), Magian (Arabian, Syrian, Jewish, Byzantine, and Islamic), and “Faustian” (Western European) cultures. Criticizing linear notions of progressive history that culminate in West-

ern Civilization as Eurocentric approaches, Spengler emphasized that cultures are units with their own worldviews, logic, mathematics, and notions of time. Spengler studied these cultures as independent units with no greater plan than their rise, decline, and fall — analogous to the life cycles of organisms. High cultures, he maintained, thrive on vitality and creativity and are organic in nature; they pass the stages of birth, development, fulfillment, decay, and death, and for every high culture, “civilization” is the fulfillment, conclusion, or finale of its goal orientation. But with the onset of the stage of civilization, the culture starts decaying as its creative potential has been played out and now results in decadence and ossification.

By seeing civilizations as incommensurable units, Spengler avoided imposing a Western, “Faustian,” linear notion of historical time upon other cultures. Rather than creating a narrative that ties all cultures together into a single causal explanation of the course of history, he emphasized something “that has never before been established: that man is not only historyless before the birth of the Culture, but again becomes so as soon as a Civilization has worked itself out fully to the definite form which betokens the end of the living development of the Culture and the exhaustion of the last potentialities of

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, 57–124 (Cambridge, 1997).

its significant existence.”¹³ Once the soul of a culture dies out, its population becomes invisible on the stage of world history, fighting perhaps for power, but no longer for greater ideas. Spengler thus effectively defined world history in terms of great cultures and their interrelationships. By doing so, he challenged the Eurocentrism of the West and of its historical understanding, in which the West had given itself a privileged position as the bearer of civilization and understood this in terms of moral, technological, or other forms of advancement.

But Spengler went even further when he stated that this historicist self-understanding was an indicator of the decline of Faustian culture. The rigid state of civilization had been reached, as belief in progress, technology, and mechanics ruled, and classical ideas of Faustian culture, such as nobility, religion, art, and honor had lost their relevance. In this light, historicism can be read as a characteristic of the decline of a Faustian culture that reads itself not in terms of creative becoming but in terms of having become.¹⁴ However, by radicalizing historicism as a characteristic of Faustian culture, Spengler effectively historicized historicism and did away with its pretense of being able to transcend its historical position in the understanding of remote pasts and cultures. What was left was the task of mapping the morphology of the history of cultures, in analogy to nature, a process in which historical consciousness is itself embedded in Faustian civilization, a destiny it cannot escape. Spengler hinted that his own work — “a comprehensive Physiognomic of all existence, a morphology of becoming for *all* humanity that drives onward to the highest and last ideas; a duty of penetrating the worldfeeling not only of our proper soul but of all souls whatsoever that have contained grand possibilities and have expressed them in the field of actuality as grand Cultures” — was the last great task of Western philosophy, a work that was only comprehensible to the Faustian mind, and as such to be the last and final philosophy of Faustian culture.¹⁵

Beyond Nostalgia

Although the conception of history Spengler aired in the *Untergang des Abendlandes* did not offer possibilities for fruitfully establishing utopian expectations for a future Germany, Conservative Revolutionaries got a different message out of the widely read book. First of all, they read it as a diagnosis of a passing age, and understood that building a new culture, which harbors new creative dynamics, should not be based on historicism since historicism was one of the

13 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Complete in One Volume*, Vol. 2: *Perspectives of World-History* (London, 1959), 48.

14 It is important to note that Spengler does not speak of “historicism” but refers to this in terms of what Eduard Meyer called “historical treatment.” *Ibid.*, 47.

15 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West, Complete in One Volume*, Vol. 1: *Form and Actuality* (London, 1959), 159.

hallmarks of the decaying civilization. And Spengler, while holding on to historical individuality, had taken earlier critiques of historicism's historical relativism to its final conclusion by promoting a morphology of cultures over universal histories.¹⁶

As Spengler's diagnosis indicated that a lack of vital creativity made the downfall of Western civilization inevitable, the crucial question was how to reinvigorate culture so that the future could become more than the shadow of past glory. This question was urgent for all conservatives, especially for those who rejected the fatalism and determinism inherent in Spengler's conception of history. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, for example, debated Spengler in the *Juni-Klub* in early 1920, and fully agreed with Spengler's rejection of a linear and materialistic conception of history even as he challenged his monadism.¹⁷ Based on this agreement, Moeller advocated a spiral understanding of history in which possibilities for the rejuvenation and regeneration of nations existed.¹⁸ Nonetheless, he did not refute Spengler's rejection of historicism. Moeller argued that Spengler had written his book during the war in the expectation that Germany would win. The German defeat diminished the expectation that Germany would succumb to Spengler's stage of civilization afterward. Without a homogenous West, there could be no homogenous decline. While acknowledging Spengler's overall morphology, Moeller retained an optimism for the national regeneration of vital young nations such as Germany and Russia, which were not built upon corrupted rational and liberal ideals like the old Western nations, because the outcome of the war had separated them from the fatal destiny of the West.¹⁹ In this vision of rejuvenation, an artificial reenactment or revival of past glories would not suffice, because that would be exactly the type of vainglorious expression of nostalgia that a decaying culture would resort to. This is where the Conservative Revolution parted from nineteenth-century conservatism.

In his well-known book *Das Dritte Reich* (1923), Moeller set out to map the conditions of German national regeneration. Although this book has widely been interpreted in political terms, the overall narrative is one in which he positioned conservatism in Germany's historical culture. The major part of the book is not about the establishment of a Third Reich but contains an exploration of how various political movements corresponded to opposing conceptions of history. Moeller regarded the four most important positions as the

16 Joanne Miyang Cho, "Historicism and Civilizational Discontinuity in Spengler and Troeltsch," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 51, no. 3 (1999): 238-62, here 245.

17 Frits Boterman, *Oswald Spengler en Der Untergang des Abendlandes: cultuurpessimist en politiek activist* (Assen, 1992), 228. "Monadism" in this context refers to the doctrine that Spengler's cultures are self-contained and have implied goal orientations.

18 André Schlüter, *Moeller van den Bruck: Leben und Werk* (Cologne, 2010), 311; Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Recht der jungen Völker* (Munich, 1919).

19 Fritz Richard Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1974), 239.

revolutionary, the liberal, the reactionary, and the conservative, the last of which he considered the most — and indeed only — positive force. The backdrop to his analysis was the question of which conception of history — and thus which political movement — was most apt to take on the national regeneration of Germany in the context of the lost war, the German Revolutions of 1918 and 1919, and the young Weimar Republic.

Moeller argued that a return of the German nation to vitality was to be expected from conservatives, and not from liberals, who — he claimed — blatantly denied the necessity of change and strove to achieve individualist personal gains in the present world. The return to vitality was not to be expected from revolutionaries either, as they held on to the ill-founded belief that the world would forever be governed by their own revolutionary principles. Nor could proper change be expected from the type of conservatives whom he dubbed reactionaries. Reactionaries considered themselves to be conservatives, but they naively clung to the image of the bygone world which they aimed to restore, lumping together what was worth preserving and what was not. The true conservative, however, retained the historicist acknowledgment of the everlasting contingency of history, as he tried to balance a preservation of what was valuable from the past with the acknowledgment that catastrophes and revolutions necessitate change. While the reactionary lost himself in nostalgia, the liberal kept believing that democratic progress continues in spite of war and revolutions, and the revolutionary contended that the world had always been amiss until the moment of his revolution. The conservative, on the other hand, balanced between these views. He acknowledged the fact that the world had gone astray and “seeks to discover where a new beginning may be made.”²⁰ But the conservative refrained from falling prey to the revolutionary’s hubris and asked himself the question of what was worth conserving. In answering that question, he had to remember what conservatives had forgotten in the course of the nineteenth century, that is, that “a conservative’s function is to create values which are worth conserving.”²¹ Retaining what is valuable in the light of necessitated change is thus always a conscious action taken in the present, and it is not the past as such that dictates importance.

But one question remains. Moeller embraced the historicist notion of historical contingency or individuality, and saw the conservative as the mediator between past and present. But does this idea of me-

20 Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany's Third Empire* (London, 1934), 203.

21 *Ibid.*, 216.

diation not imply that he also embraced the second component of Nowak's definition of historicism, continuity? Would that not make his theory fully historicist? After all, Moeller had rejected Spengler's insistence on discontinuity. In order to answer this question, we must move beyond the focus on the understanding of history within the Conservative Revolution and include an assessment of its understanding of temporality.

Eternity and Temporality

In temporal terms, Moeller's strategy of positioning conservatism vis-a-vis other ideologies relied on tying their ideological outlook to one of the three temporal dimensions of past, present, and future. The reactionary, he argued, was backwards-oriented to the past, and the revolutionary was merely future-oriented to the extent that he denied the relevance of all that came before beyond being a cause for revolution. But in order to imagine such a revolution, the revolutionary relied on the legacy of the liberal, who invented the notion of linear progress that fueled the revolutionary's conception of history. The liberal, in turn was "the reactionary of Yesterday's revolution seeking to enjoy his Today."²² Mainly linking liberalism to the victorious countries of the First World War, Moeller stressed that they were enjoying the spoils of war in denial of the need for revolutionary change. The liberal had outlived his own revolution and was now seeking to reap its harvest in an individualistic manner. The temporal concerns of the liberal, therefore, were not directed at the past or future but at the present. Moeller positioned the conservative in this field of temporal orientations not by linking him to either of the temporal dimensions, but by linking him to all. In doing so, however, he introduced "eternity" as something that conservatism had "on its side."²³

While the reactionary saw the world as he had known it, "the conservative sees it as it has been and will always be. He distinguishes the transitory from the eternal. Exactly what has been, can never be again. But what the world has once brought forth she can bring forth again."²⁴ Moeller here made a distinction between what was worth preserving and what was not: those elements from the past that are eternal in nature and are the result of creative acts that brought what is timeless to temporal form — that is, that exceed themselves — are worth preserving. Whatever is transitory in nature because it is not concerned with eternal principles, but with self-containment and with short-term

22 *Ibid.*, 229.

23 *Ibid.*, 201.

24 *Ibid.*, 181.

interests, is not worth preserving. The act of preserving implies that the choice of what to preserve from the past entirely depends on an agent in the present who chooses what to preserve. When this agent wants to creatively establish a new foundation for society, then the choice of what to preserve must be based on what alluded to eternity in the past. Only then can the past meaningfully inform and inspire the future. This procedure entails a conscious mythification, and, in Moeller's case, led to the utopian postulation of a "Third Reich" based on conservative-revolutionary values and, as such, embodied both Germany's destiny and Europe's salvation.²⁵ This Germany for him was to be the Germany of "All Time, the Germany of a two-thousand-year past, the Germany of an eternal present which dwells in the spirit, but must be secured in reality and can only so be politically secured."²⁶

Eternity is a category crucial to understanding the Conservative Revolution's conceptualization of history, but the concept is surprisingly excluded from the theoretical frameworks present-day scholars of historical culture use.²⁷ "Eternity" typically has one of two meanings, both of which are derived from and mobilized in different traditions of thought. In the first tradition, which relies on Aristotle's understanding of time as the number of the motion of (celestial) bodies, eternity represents an infinite row of "nows" — that is, eternity is thought of as time with infinite duration. The second, Platonic, definition understands eternity as a mode of being unconditioned by time, and as a timelessness that transcends time. This conception made it possible to imagine God as the timeless and absolute ground or foundation of Being.²⁸

The use of the notion of eternity was not unequivocal in the Conservative Revolution. As the concept spread widely in Conservative Revolutionary discourse throughout the 1920s, it became a commonplace that required little conceptual elucidation. The notion was explicitly used to challenge positivist epistemologies that reduced life to objects of cognition, but this did not help to explain or clarify its meaning, either. It is, after all, the very nature of eternity that it is unbound and therefore cannot present itself objectively to cognition.

In his studies of fascist ideology, Roger Griffin calls the tendency to tie references to eternity to future imagination a "palingenetic" vision of a new era. Palingenesis refers to a rebirth, but "not in the sense of restoration of what has been, which is an archetypal conservative utopia, but of a 'new birth' which retains certain eternal principles (e.g. "eternal" Roman, Aryan, or Anglo-Saxon virtues) in a new, modern

25 On the complex conceptual history of Moeller's notion of the "Third Reich," see Weiß, *Moderne Antimoderne*, 177–78.

26 Moeller van den Bruck, *Germany's Third Empire*, 264.

27 Grever and Adriaansen, "Historical Culture," 83.

28 Obviously, the differences between Plato's and Aristotle's positions are not this clear-cut, but we will stick to the ideal typical definitions for the sake of clarity. See W. von Leyden, "Time, Number, and Eternity in Plato and Aristotle," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 54 (1964): 35–52, 35, doi:10.2307/2955440.

type of society.”²⁹ Although Griffin acknowledges that such visions are not bound to specific eras or cultures, he argues that for the study of fascism, the notion offers more clarity than concepts like “apocalyptic” and “millenarian,” the religious dimension of which can easily be misapprehended. It was the combination of palingenetic visions with a racial and organicist ultranationalism that made up the typical “mythic core” of Nazism and fascism.³⁰ Griffin stresses that there was a kinship between fascists and Conservative Revolutionaries because both shared a core of palingenetic nationalism, and because authors such as Moeller van den Bruck and Ernst Jünger helped to inspire National Socialism.³¹

Michael Seelig advocates an analysis of the Conservative Revolution as a form of “palingenetic and synthesizing ultranationalism,” arguing that it strove for a national rebirth, “the goal of which was not a reactionary return to the past, but a ‘progressive’-modernist journey ‘back to the future,’ in which the contrasts of past and present are dialectically removed.”³² Although the first part of the sentence is absolutely correct, the latter introduces a Hegelian logic that did not resonate in the Conservative Revolution. The historicist idea of historical individuality was not structurally challenged in the Conservative Revolution, and was — as Osborne argues and as my analysis of Moeller van den Bruck indicates — often used to necessitate a disruptive revolution. It was exactly because of the essential difference between past and present that the need for renewal or revolution was recognized. The idea of morphology prescribed that when social and cultural forms (ranging from customs, art, law, and political organization to religion) had outlived the spirit or ideas that gave rise to them, they became meaningless and needed to either be removed or reinvigorated. The idea of conflating past and present does not make sense in the context of conservative-revolutionary thought. What does make sense is past and present forms existing in their individuality, and being preferably invigorated by eternal values and ideas. One could say that the goal of conservative thought was not a sublimation into the eternal, but an incarnation of the eternal in history. What I mean by this could best be explained with an example of how the past was concretely made relevant to the present in conservative-revolutionary thought.

The Middle Ages as a Utopian Category

In 1922 the 21-year-old student Paul-Ludwig Landsberg published a booklet called *Die Welt des Mittelalters und wir*.³³ In the book Landsberg

29 Roger Griffin, “The Palingenetic Core of Fascist Ideology,” 2003, <https://www.libraryof-socialscience.com/ideologies/resources/griffin-the-palingenetic-core/>.

30 Roger Griffin, “I Am No Longer Human. I Am a Titan. A God! The Fascist Quest to Regenerate Time,” in *A Fascist Century: Essays by Roger Griffin*, ed. Matthew Feldman, 3–23 (London, 2008), 13.

31 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1991), 51.

32 Michael Seelig, “Die ‘Konservative Revolution’ als historische Geisteshaltung und Wissenschaftlicher Analysebegriff: Vom Nutzen eines Umstrittenen Quellenbegriffs für die Forschung zur Radikalen Rechten in der Weimarer Republik,” *Archiv Für Kulturgeschichte* 98, no. 2 (2017): 381–418, here 418, doi:10.7788/akg-2016-0207.

33 Paul Ludwig Landsberg, *Die Welt des Mittelalters und wir: ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über den Sinn eines Zeitalters* (Bonn, 1923).

presented a cyclical philosophy of history, which argued that the history of the West had developed in three stages: order, habituation, and anarchy. He defined the first stage as the state in which “a part of the objective, divine world order has become a notion and a life form.”³⁴ In this stage obedience and commitment to God provides a guiding principle in individual and collective life. Historically, Landsberg connected this stage primarily to the Middle Ages, where the world was governed by a divine metaphysical or cosmic order. While flora and fauna served mankind, mankind in turn lived in the social structure of the estates in which each estate had its own purpose and contributed to the common good. God, whose glory was reflected in the world through devotion and obedience, reigned above all things. The stage of habituation, Landsberg held, encompasses the situation in which the social and cultural forms of the old order became ossified and maintained in a state of anxiety, as its original spirit and meaning faded through habituation and customization. Finally, anarchy promised to put an end to society being governed by empty forms from the past. Anarchy stood for an active and creative *Sehnsucht* [longing] to seek and establish a new order. According to Landsberg, this cycle had repeated itself twice in the history of the West. The order of Antiquity resulted in the habituation of old forms in Late Antiquity, which in turn was overhauled in the transition period of anarchy of the Early Middle Ages, to settle in the new order of the High Middle Ages, only to become habitual again in bourgeois modernity, represented in negative counter currents such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, socialism and liberalism.³⁵

To Landsberg his own era represented the anarchy-seeking new order, and he presented his book as an attempt to achieve that order. In terms of content, his argument entailed a revision of Jacob Burckhardt’s famous thesis that the Renaissance had laid the foundations of modernity, as it emancipated the individual from both the bonds of family and community and from the authority of faith.³⁶ Landsberg saw the burgeoning modernity not as representing the rise of individualism but the demise of what he called the “ordo-consciousness” — the consciousness of all phenomena representing universal order — of the High Middle Ages.³⁷ Thus, he situated the turning point in fourteenth-century nominalism rather than the Renaissance. The nominalist victory over scholastic realism, he held, was the first sign of the demise of ordo-consciousness in favor of a modern worldview that upheld the old institutions but no longer believed in the cosmology that installed them: metaphysics was traded for epistemology,

34 Ibid., 114.

35 Ibid.

36 Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, *The Rhythm of Eternity: The German Youth Movement and the Experience of the Past, 1900–1933* (New York, 2015), 136.

37 Otto Gerhard Oexle, “German Malaise of Modernity: Ernst H. Kantorowicz and His ‘Kaiser Friedrich der Zweite,’” in *Ernst Kantorowicz*, ed. Robert L. Benson and Johannes Fried, 33–56 (Stuttgart, 1997), 40.

being was traded for thought, and eternity was traded for temporality. Consequently, universality could only be conceived of inadequately in modernity as a generalization of individualities, and eternity only as a derivate of temporality.

Landsberg's answer — much like Moeller van den Bruck's — did not entail a revival of medieval metaphysics — this he deemed an impossible task. But he thought the Middle Ages could function as an *exemplum* for the present. "We can only learn from another era," Landsberg noted, "where it is more than itself, where it protrudes into the eternal."³⁸ He therefore effectively dehistoricized and mythicized the Middle Ages to the extent that they lost the connotation of being a historical era and became a "possibility of being" that appeared most vividly during the historical High Middle Ages but would always be potentially present.³⁹ In this way, Landsberg attacked the historicist understanding of the remoteness and otherness of the past, because as a "possibility of being" the "Middle Ages" was always awaiting realization in a new era in which the nominalist tendencies towards individuation that also guided historicism would be overcome. In such an era, he argued, the question of Being instead of becoming would be the guiding principle — was it not in the tradition of medieval mysticism that the eternal God was the ground of Being? — and any form of historicist and rationalist thought would be replaced by "medieval" cosmology. Landsberg called this dawn of a new order the "Conservative Revolution" or the "revolution of the eternal." It was a "becoming and already being in the present hour."⁴⁰

There is no Hegelian sublimation of two opposing positions here; there is no spirit that is essentially absolute and eternal and manifests itself in and as History in a process of self-realization. There are simply dispositions — a timeless absolute one and a temporal human one — that can be attuned or choose not to be. Redemption, Landsberg maintained, was not to come from the absolute that would then need anthropomorphisms to become imaginable, but mankind could redeem itself through a change in dispositions that would repair the broken unity of "form" and "life." In modernity, life and form had become antithetical, as the order of forms had become habitual and life appeared as anarchy, because forms no longer expressed life.⁴¹ The task for the future was to create new forms drawn from life, from inner experience, which could thus contribute to a new order. The historical Middle Ages were proof that

38 Landsberg, *Die Welt des Mittelalters und wir*, 12.

39 *Ibid.*, 7.

40 *Ibid.*, 112.

41 *Ibid.*

this had been possible in that historical context, and could as such be a source of inspiration for establishing new forms of order in the context of post-World War I Germany.

To Landsberg, the dehistoricized Middle Ages were a utopian category, not because the era projected a certain historical golden age onto the future to be realized but because it encouraged that what is eternal be brought to form in that particular historical context, which the High Middle Ages allegedly succeeded in achieving. Modernity, however, by definition could not understand this because it tried to grasp eternity from the temporal and not the other way around. This process of bringing eternity to form, Landsberg averred, should be repeated over and over again as times change, and whenever this vitality is absent the danger of habituation lurks.

This attitude to the Middle Ages was widespread in the Conservative Revolution. The period became one of the focal points of utopian imagination in the Bündische Jugend, the “free” youth movement of the 1920s and early 1930s that comprised many Wandervogel and scouting organizations.⁴² It spurred the Wandervogel Annemarie Wächter to write in a letter that one’s task as a human, and the task of all mankind, was to shape one’s life in harmony with the inner forces of life. For that reason she hiked to Gothic cathedrals to sense the medieval spirit of community. In Gothic altarpieces she experienced the essence of art, that is, the art of symbolically expressing inner powers. Consequently, she argued, the youth movement felt drawn to the medieval Gothic. A sensibility that “rose from the longing to flee the utilitarian, earthly life and discover again the powers in man that are beyond the rational.”⁴³ In the same vein, the Conservative Revolutionary publicist Edgar Julius Jung emphasized that “form and formlessness are two eternal social principles”, and whereas historical appearances continuously change, the ordering principles remain the same. “Therefore, if we connect to the Middle Ages and see the great form there, we not only explore the present, but see it as more real than those who cannot look behind the scenes.”⁴⁴ This is not a backward-looking Romanticism, but an acknowledgment of the metaphysical principles that govern life and history, and which contemporary society should again express in its culture and social organization: “We see the world as it is because not only are we of *this* world, but also because we sense the metaphysical and the cosmic laws in ourselves. Therefore, our hour has come: the hour of the German revolution.”⁴⁵

42 Adriaansen, *The Rhythm of Eternity*, 119–57.

43 Annemarie Wachter, *Anni: Letters and Writings of Annemarie Wachter* (Rifton, NY, 2010), 26.

44 Edgar J. Jung, “Deutschland und die konservative Revolution,” in *Deutsche über Deutschland*, 369–83 (Munich, 1932), 383.

45 *Ibid.*

Conclusion

To assess the Conservative Revolution's utopianism, we must part from the general assumption that utopias are attainable or unattainable ideal societies that individuals, groups, or societies wish to realize in the future. Such conceptualizations of utopia are themselves the product of a modern conception of history and, by definition, rule out the possibility that the Conservative Revolution's imagination of the future had utopian content, exactly because it challenged the linear premises on which that concept of utopia relies. Reinhart Koselleck explains that the concept of utopia lost its spatial association in favor of a temporal one under the influence of the rise of modern historical consciousness with the onset of modernity. A utopia was no longer imagined as a remote place, but as a remote future. He also stresses that Conservative Revolutionary Carl Schmitt, in his 1917 essay "Die Buribunken," satirized this notion of utopia into a negative utopia by means of which "readers are situated before an alternative that they are scarcely capable of perceiving in the tradition of the historical and progressive view of the world."⁴⁶

In this essay, I have explored this Conservative Revolutionary alternative, but because the "historical and progressive view of the world" still informs contemporary historical scholarship, this means that the difficulties of interpreting the alternative have also affected historiography. When Peter Osborne — building on Jeffrey Herf's notion of "reactionary modernism" — argues that the Conservative Revolution resorted to a thoroughly modern temporal logic in rejecting a "modern" past and present in favor of a radically new future, he displays his own historicism by assuming that Conservative Revolutionaries conceived of the future as a linear extrapolation of the present. The alternative, which perceives past, present, and future in relationship to eternity, is not imaginable in this conception of history. This means that "Conservative Revolution" as a concept only seems oxymoronic to those who keep reading it in a historicist temporal framework. It is this framework that dictates conservatism's implied turn to the past and revolution's orientation toward the future. Within this framework, Landsberg's "revolution of the eternal" could then only be seen as a "misrepresentation," as Osborne calls it.⁴⁷

To avoid these pitfalls, a more existential understanding of utopia could be helpful. For Paul Tillich, for example, utopias are rooted in the structure of being, as people are continuously projecting themselves in time. Such an approach challenges the widely held

46 Reinhart Koselleck, "The Temporalization of Utopia," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck 84–99 (Stanford, 2002), here 98.

47 Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 167.

assumption that utopianism is the property of the revolutionary left and the apparent paradox of Conservative Revolutionary thinking. It opens up the analysis of the utopianism of movements of societies that think unhistorically (not ahistorically!), which rely on “a comprehension of history which is born out of something else than history, and which consequently attributes no self-reliance, no autonomy to history. This comprehension makes history reliant on other forces and thereby dissolves it.”⁴⁸ Such utopias rely on different conceptions of history, on different configurations of time, and may well give priority to the spatial over the temporal imagination. In this way, the Conservative Revolution’s utopianism as the spatial realization of the eternal in social, political, and cultural forms makes up the core of its palingenetic vision.

⁴⁸ Paul Tillich, “Die politische Bedeutung der Utopie im Leben der Völker,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 6, ed. Renate Albrecht, 157–210 (Stuttgart, 1963), 173.

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