

Conclusion

Bringing a Despotic Agenda Into the Public Sphere – Concluding Remarks on Languages of Reform

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Ne méconnaissons pas la puissance des mots: trop long-temps ils ont exercé un funeste empire! . . . Soyons donc fidèles, non-seulement à Dieu et à notre Roi, mais encore à la vérité, et au langage qui en est l'expression

Let us not underestimate the power of words: for too long have they exercised a deadly rule! . . . Let us therefore rely not only on God and our king, but also on truth and on the one language which is its expression.

—Karl Ludwig von Haller, 1822¹

Karl Ludwig von Haller (1768–1854) has remained present in political history as the eponym of the *Restauration* (Restoration) for the period from 1815 to 1830 in Europe. This seems an appropriate reward for a declared enemy of the Enlightenment and Revolution, who was very aware that the previous world-historical revaluations and schools of thought were, not least, a work of language. Those who called themselves *philosophes* and Liberals dismissed their opponents as obscurantists and fanatical Ultras. In Haller's eyes, however, the latter were representatives of justice and a natural social order that opposed the revolutionary sophists and liars, anarchists and Jacobins – not least on the battlefield of party concepts. When Haller called for the language of truth to be used he meant a particular language among the many competing languages of his time, the one that expressed the God-given order: his own truth. This was a different truth, and thus a different language, from the noble but empty words of the promoters of a “*réforme radicale*”, a radical realisation of freedom, equality, and popular sovereignty.²

Examples of linguistic change during certain decades of the Enlightenment have been presented in this book. At the end of those decades the language itself and the use of language as a means of reform dynamics were analysed and, in the case of Haller, criticised. This volume depicts this slow process of consciousness-building. Originally, and following the existing research literature, the initiators of the project proceeded on the principal assumption that the concept of *reform* underwent a fundamental change early in the eighteenth century, the age Franco Venturi labelled

Settecento riformatore in his homonymous opus. They expected *reform* to be very affirmatively associated with an intentional and systematic overcoming of long-established but unjustified deficiencies. Furthermore, and following Reinhart Koselleck, they presumed a growing cleavage, as far as human actions are concerned, between “spaces of experience” and “horizons of expectation”, leading to an increased readiness to legitimise far-reaching breaks with entrenched habits – even if the consequences that the viable alternatives entailed were not entirely predictable at the moment of decision.³ In the event of a continuous and accelerated transformation of the perspectives, means, and ends of societal action, so the contributors believed, the persistent recourse to timeless precedents and rules of action as they originated in Christian morality became less and less powerful. Finally, the authors of this volume took it as given that eighteenth-century contemporaries identified their respective futures as open for development and, therefore, faced them with an increasing desire for shaping.

Contrary to this initial point, the present case studies suggest that the clear-cut scheme that existing research suggests needs to be revised considerably. This volume reveals the fact that for a long time, striving for reform was conceived within the traditional figures of reasoning and that the *back-to-the-good-old-ways* line was more than just a rhetorical argument. The direction of reform remained unaltered and the term itself maintained its original, retrospective meaning, as in the Latin word *re-formare* (and similarly *re-volvere*, for revolution). It is well known, and several studies in this volume demonstrate it again, that *reformatio* and *réforme*, first documented in French in 1625, with their further variants in the vernaculars, were traditionally thought of – and continued to be thought of well into the eighteenth century – as the restoration of an earlier, unadulterated state. In this respect reform was close to the idea of a correction (*correctio*, also *restitutio*), which becomes necessary when the original state established by God has been corrupted by time and by human activity. From the end of the seventeenth century, in addition to *restoration* (*rétablissement dans l'ancienne forme*) the idea of *improvement* arose (“dans une meilleure forme”, according to the 1694 Académie française dictionary). It was increasingly extended from the moral–religious sphere to the institutional–political sphere. In this volume Gisela Schlüter opposes the two meanings of reform as the “retrospective, past-oriented restorative notion” and the “prospective, future-oriented melioristic notion”.

Change Between Authority and Caution

To tie this conceptual change to historical and constitutional developments it should be noted that the spread of melioristic connotations went along with rapidly growing room for manoeuvre in the shaping of secular rule. Since Jean Bodin's *Six livres de la République* (1576) this could be

legitimised by the doctrine of sovereignty: For the common good, and especially in a state of emergency (*necessitas*), the sovereign no longer had to abide by the existing law but could repeal old laws and enact new ones. The “puissance de donner et casser la loi”, as Bodin defined the sovereign’s core competence, was increasingly not only a theoretical claim but also a programme – rulership, and in particular absolute rule, defined and legitimised itself through the ability to identify and remedy grievances. The norms of the past or of divine order (with their disadvantages and limitations that humankind could understand only with difficulty, but previously had fatalistically accepted) served less and less as guidelines. A rational will to rule increasingly defined the motives, means, and objectives of political action that led to a process of ongoing and lasting change. In this respect *reform* could become, as it were, the battle cry of more or less enlightened absolutism, which set out actively to shape an open future.

The conceptual change in political thought is evident if one looks at Machiavelli’s completely different, reactive, and defensive understanding of politics, which sought to preserve the state (*mantenere lo stato*). For him military expansion is a means of preserving the virtues (both martial and otherwise) of the citizens and, above all, the state. At the same time the latter must adapt to the changing demands of a constitutional cycle, demands which can be anticipated once one has thoroughly researched history and human behaviour through one’s own experience and through reading the ancient authors. In other words if one learns the lessons from both the recent and the distant past, one will be able to anticipate how things will go on (*historia magistra vitae*).⁴

For Montesquieu, on the other hand, expansion is one of the competencies of the state and regulated by international law. It corresponds to the natural right to individual self-defence. By expansion and other strategies the state can assert itself or adapt to changing times, but the course of things is not cyclical and, therefore, cannot be anticipated. For its part a state that is not up to date but corrupt or tyrannical is easily conquered, and this may perhaps be to the benefit of both the state and its subjects: “Un gouvernement parvenu au point où il ne peut plus se réformer lui-même, que perdrait-il à être refondu?”⁵ Montesquieu uses *réforme* mostly in the conventional sense to mean that abuses – especially in the church – are rectified and an earlier state is restored. Another aspect is also important in *Esprit des lois*: *réforme* is the voluntaristic counterpart to *changement*. *Réforme* is based on clearly tangible political, in particular legislative, decisions (*décision*), while *changement* means barely perceptible change in customs and traditions that leads to imitation of models and fashions – and not to obedience through laws. In this context Montesquieu criticises Tsar Peter the Great because he forced his subjects to shave off their beards.⁶

Montesquieu expresses a fundamental problem. Reform is no longer a return to former, original, and thus better conditions but the legislative

shaping of the future. For this very reason, however, it must be legitimised in such a way that it contrasts as little as possible with the existing conditions and customs, which are based on tradition. Thus chapter 19.2 of his *Esprit des lois* explains that a people must be duly prepared even for the best laws that guarantee its freedom: “Pour les meilleures lois il est nécessaire que les esprits soient préparés.”⁷ The legislator must never legislate against the “esprit général d’une nation”, i.e. against the geocultural and political *imprint* of a particular nation. Even less should he correct everything but leave the people essentially the way they are: “Qu’on nous laisse tels que nous sommes.”⁸

The challenge for the thinkers of the Enlightenment would be to combine the recognised need for future-oriented reform with the postulate of freedom as it was based in historical tradition and, more recently, in natural law. Its argumentative roots in Grotius are discussed in this volume by Johannes Süßmann in his reflections on contractual freedom. Montesquieu saw this freedom as a traditional European characteristic but also as endangered, if not already severely restricted, by the very rational and rationalising will of the absolute sovereign. This position was not restricted to the aristocratic Montesquieu, who mourned the political influence the nobility had had before Louis XIV. Already in 1694 Robert Molesworth had declared the aristocratic opposition’s conviction, based on the “Gothic tradition”, that freedom is ancient and despotism recent in Europe: “All Europe was in a manner a free country till very lately.”⁹

Other authors give reasons that relate more to conservative inertia. In 1719, the Saxon Cameralist Julius Bernhard von Rohr (1688–1742) claimed for the prince the right to reform the state as if he were a doctor who intervenes to fight diseases. However, “the reform should be carried out in such a way that the state and the constitution of the common being, insofar as they are good, are preserved unharmed by it and no greater evils arise from it”.¹⁰ This also requires restraint, even serenity, for the prince should “not always be resolute in improving the constitution of the commonwealth, but only in ensuring that it does not become worse”. In particular, reforms “should not be carried out abruptly and at once, but little by little, so that the minds get accustomed and led from one to the next in an unnoticed manner”. Even when it comes to improving the state the prince must not deviate from the “rules of justice”, i.e. from fundamental laws and earlier covenants, but also not impair the “present state” and “the present constitution”. “The means by which the *status publicus* is to be improved must be such that they do not run counter to natural law and equity, otherwise they taste of Machiavelian principles.”¹¹ The warning against Machiavelli, the mastermind of reason of State, makes it clear how firmly Rohr rejects the argument that the sovereign can create a better constitution if he reforms what is currently existing. Tradition remains the authority and it is not substituted by the prince.

According to Molesworth and Rohr, who differ heavily in other aspects, reform projects risked being associated with absolutism or despotism not only as innovations in individual areas but as a novel, systematic form of governance. Who, if not the prince, could best judge which institutions or persons did not function as efficiently as he wished? Yet who, apart from himself, really wanted state institutions to become more efficient, i.e. to collect taxes or raise armies despite opposition, to bring legal proceedings under the prince's control, or to abolish old customs? A look at the much-vaunted policy of tolerance of some rulers of the eighteenth century shows these dilemmas, which become clear in Avi Lifschitz's contribution. The *improvement* of the Jews, not as a social or economic question but as a legal one, enabled the state to regulate interventions in spheres previously reserved for the churches (public practice of faith) or communities (citizenship). Christian Wilhelm Dohm's understanding of love for the fatherland, or rather of the state, broke with conventional group loyalties and so it was indeed a radical reassessment when he declared, "the aristocrat, the peasant, the scholar, the manual worker, the Christian and the Jew is a *citizen* to a greater extent than his other identities".¹² The declared aim of such equality was equal subordination to the state authorities who would make the best out of a society's potential.

The consequences of such fundamental rational claims explain why even declared exponents of the Enlightenment were so reluctant when it came to reforms. According to the Dutch economic patriots, it was an essential characteristic of the "good citizen" that he "never wishes to see the state's constitution altered".¹³ In the *Encyclopédie* Louis de Jaucourt followed Montesquieu's ideas when he wrote the articles "Innovation" and "Nouveauté", which are more informative than "Réforme". Jaucourt consciously defines *nouveauté*, without judgement, as any change, renewal, good or bad reform, whether beneficial or detrimental ("tout changement, innovation, réforme bonne ou mauvaise, avantageuse ou nuisible"). In the course of time institutions can deteriorate, as can the customs which were once appropriate to them and which later, out of habit, prevent innovations even if they would be good and useful. Therefore innovations should only be gradual and inconspicuous ("peu à peu & pour ainsi dire insensiblement") so that those affected are not taken by surprise and offended; those who lose something in a change will turn against the person who caused it. Therefore political improvements should not be introduced unless considerable hardship needs to be relieved and clear benefits can be demonstrated: "We must be careful that it is the enlightened desire to reform that attracts change, and not the frivolous desire for change that attracts reform" ("Enfin il faut prendre garde que ce soit le desir éclairé de réformer qui attire le changement, & non pas le desir frivole du changement qui attire la réforme").¹⁴

De Jaucourt's caution is also evident in the lemma "Innovation": a major change in politics that breaks with customs and constitutional

rules (“contre l’usage & les regles de sa constitution”). Laws and customs correspond, in Montesquieu’s sense, to the “génie d’une nation” and they are so firmly joined together that an innovation remains a foreign body, especially if it is introduced without careful consideration and based upon bad models. “The revolutions that time brings in the course of nature, arrive step by step; it is thus necessary to imitate this slowness for the useful innovations that one can introduce in the state.”¹⁵

Reforms are, therefore, necessary, but they are a radical solution that should be applied carefully and in clearly defined, manageable areas. Otherwise – as in the case of Peter the Great or, implicitly, Louis XIV – they will be perceived as tyrannical, which in turn weakens and endangers the state. Reforms are indispensable to steer the state into an unpredictable future but they are also dangerous if they too obviously break with the familiar past. In this case subjects or citizens will begin to worry about their privileges and property, even their lives. For where are the limits of a rule that respects no boundaries, even when it comes to insignificant issues such as the fashion of wearing beards? The much more far-reaching reform plans to increase the tax base by abolishing historical privileges and to distribute the burden more equally made France enter a crisis cycle in the 1780s, which led directly into the revolution.

As to Great Britain, its development was not without crisis but ultimately took place within the constitutional framework that had existed since 1689. So it comes as no surprise that David Hume introduced his *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1752) by declaring that proven and tested political customs are better than experiments based on philosophical speculation:

An established government has an infinite advantage, by that very circumstance of its being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority, not reason, and never attributing authority to any thing that has not the recommendation of antiquity. To tamper, therefore, in this affair, or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age; and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution.¹⁶

Innovations can be imagined but they should come along in the guise of the accustomed and should not call the existing constitution into question. Hume’s aversion to speculative philosophy was echoed in the Netherlands, by authors who discarded *innovation* as “projecting”, “scheming”, and thus related to gambling, foolishness, and fraud.¹⁷ They all are, together with Montesquieu, De Jaucourt, and Hume, outstanding

examples of a cautious approach to reforms even among the *philosophes* who based their prudence in a very reflective historical and anthropological assessment.

The Example of the Past: Venice

Venice is a telling case to illustrate that republics were probably even more resistant than monarchies to the discourses and practices of change, since the elite patricians did not want to accept a strong leader whose trenchant decisions might threaten the established yet fragile constitutional equilibria. Institutional changes had to be proposed most cautiously, as can be seen in Scipione Maffei (1675–1755) and his *Suggerimento per la perpetua preservazione della Repubblica Veneta*, written probably in 1736 and published only posthumously. What this erudite marquis from the subject city of Verona on the Terraferma described with negative connotations as “novelties” of the present time (“le novità a’ nostri giorni avvenute”) was the “exuberance” of the predominant European crowns and their despotic attitude (“l’aria dispotica”) towards weaker states, which they readily occupied and transferred to the rule of other dynasties. This had happened to Sicily, Sardinia, and other Italian territories in the wake of the peace treaties of Utrecht (1713) and Den Haag (1720).¹⁸ To preserve Venice from decline and a similar fate Maffei suggested that the Serenissima should grant citizenship to noblemen from the Terraferma, like him, thus following the model of ancient Rome that had regularly created new citizens (*homines novi*, such as Cicero) in allied cities. If more inhabitants felt concerned and interested as citizens of Venice they would identify much more with the republic as a common cause and defend its liberty.¹⁹

However, Maffei wanted to extend participation only to about twenty noble families of the Terraferma, not to all the inhabitants of allied cities as the ancient Romans had done. He considered too large an extension of citizenship to be one of the reasons why Rome’s republican government (“popolar governo”) had been corrupted. Therefore he preferred the other model he referred to, i.e. England, the richest country in the world and the leading maritime power, which was a kingdom only by name: “the nation is free and is governed like a republic”. This astonishing reference, which sounds like Montesquieu *avant la lettre*, shows how contemporary states and societies potentially replaced the authority of the ancients because, as Maffei put it, the modern states and societies had been more successful than the ancients in enhancing their power and wealth (“assai meglio sono riusciti i moderni degli antichi”). When he stressed that Venice had to learn (“Bisogna imparar dagl’altri”) from other states and especially from republics, Maffei wanted to convince the Venetian senate that his quite radical idea of extending sovereignty to the noble families of the Terraferma should not be considered an innovation. Ancient

and modern history had proven that its outcome would be healthy. The reform could be introduced without the slightest alteration to the current institutions and system of government: “senza la minima alterazione [o cambiamento] del presente *insituto e* (sistema di) governo”. Maffei pleaded, in general, that inventions must be avoided in politics (“non si vuol far mai progetti d’invenzione”) because nobody could foresee their effects.²⁰ To those who could still blame him for suggesting an innovation (*novità*) Maffei answered that innovations must be avoided as long as circumstances do not impose them; but if circumstances change dramatically, prudence demands adaptations to the emergency. However, such adaptations should follow successful examples, and wherever possible those of Venice’s own ancestors.²¹

In Venice itself this reference to the past was almost a refrain. The future doge Marco Foscarini (1696–1763) praised the ancestors, “i nostri Maggiori”, for having well learnt the lesson of antiquity that excessive power always leads to ruin, as happened even to Rome when it was destroyed by internal conflict and vices. Peaceful moderation was at the heart of the civic perfection (“perfezione civile”) to which Venice had come as close as possible in the past.²² The timeless myth of a constitution in equilibrium thus remained the point of reference for the Venetian elite in the eighteenth century, a constitution that needed not to be altered, therefore, but revived if need be.²³ As late as 1782 Andrea Tron (1712–1785) maintained that governing Venice was reserved for patricians like him and ultimately consisted of nothing more than adapting laws and rules to changing circumstances and needs. That was always seen as an innovation (*novità*), but to lead Venice out of crisis, no innovations were needed. It would be enough for the patricians to refrain from warlike adventures and return to the model of the noble ancestors (“le antiche massime de’ nostri maggiori”) who had concentrated on trade.²⁴

Like Maffei, Foscarini and Tron pleaded for reforms to be based on past models: either on the ancient Romans or even better on the Venetian ancestors. However Maffei concealed a concern with this postulate since he must have been aware that it actually broke with the conjured tradition. For the Veronese the reference to tradition was merely a rhetorical means of disabusing the Venetians in their own language conventions.

Personnel Change, Institutional Improvement – or Just Dissimulated Ambition?

Around the middle of the century Philipp Joseph Count Kinsky advised Maria Theresia to make changes only with care and deliberation. In this book Gregor Stiebert contrasts him with Friedrich von Harrach who, however, also demanded that the ruler must observe the “old and well-established praerogative and privileges”.²⁵ Oberstkämmerer Khevenhüller saw a series of confusions spreading “once the *esprit de nouveauté*

had begun to rule". One can imagine how Maria Theresia or Prince Kaunitz struggled with such resistance, since the queen could imagine a "completely new institution" of the administration and a "better constitution . . . for the promotion of justice and the common good". Her chancellor even feared that the whole structure of the state would collapse if things were left as they were.

Significantly the means of abolishing the "creeping abuses" were not conceived of in terms of personnel changes but rather as a new institution set up from above, namely the Council of State, which was created in 1761 and was to remedy the grievances from the ground up. Similarly, presenting the barely known world of German universities, Johan Lange also shows how the argument shifted from grievances that could be attributed to individual offenders within a self-governing corporation to an abstract analysis of the institution. In this way state bodies attained the decisive role of constituent powers in perfecting the university as an institution, or even as a *factory*, by shedding the ballast of the past and directing the sciences towards the future welfare of the state and society.

Disputes over such reform projects took place everywhere as struggles within the political and intellectual elites. Some wanted to preserve personal privileges, rights, and direct personal connections, while others wanted to extend the ruler's scope for action through centralisation and juridification (and thereby also extend their own scope, as they served as counsellors or civil servants). For this purpose *improvement* (*Verbesserung* in German) was a less conflict-prone word than *reform* and was thus itself part of an authoritarian communication strategy, what the Cameralist Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi tellingly suggested to the legislator in 1755 as a clarifying "improvement of language" ("Verbesserung der Sprache"). The article in Zedler's *Universal-Lexikon* defined "improvement" as the abolition of mistakes or bad manners and as "any effort to make up for a bad thing". However, the pretext (*Vorwand*) of improvement must not lead to laws being changed, distorted, or made more incomprehensible than before. New laws should clarify the old ones but should not modify or even replace them.²⁶ This way of thinking still set clear limits to any authority's reforming zeal since it was suspected to be nothing else than a false pretence for other, illegitimate aims which would enhance the ruler's power.

Machiavelli's bad reputation, as encountered above in Rohr and elsewhere, especially among more conventional authors, also stemmed from the fact that in the eighteenth chapter of *Il Principe* he had justified deception and dissimulation as political means. Accordingly there was an obvious suspicion that alleged reformers' talk of general improvements was only a cover adopted in order to conceal their own particular interests and, notably, the strengthening of authoritarian power. Lina Weber shows this with the example of the economic patriots, whose moral plea for the restoration of domestic consumption, which allegedly had

produced the past prosperity of the Netherlands, economically benefited themselves most and not the interests of foreign trade. A French critic wrote that those who needed the most reform themselves were screaming restlessly and loudly for reform of all possible grievances because they wanted to change everything except themselves.²⁷

If sceptically observed *change* could gradually be perceived as positive *improvement*, it was not least because the gaze was turned away from the always flawed and fallible individuals and increasingly focused on institutions or – as it was often called – the *system*. Not only did firmly established and legally constituted institutions offer themselves better than passionate humans to rational analysis and lasting improvement. If shortcomings had been remedied once and for all within an institution it in turn made it possible to improve the individuals who worked for it and who therefore had to be ready to adapt to the modified institutional rules.

Such reflections led Friedrich Carl von Moser (1723–1798) in 1759 when he advised the prince that he should not carelessly deviate from the old “system” and choose a new one when he took office. Yet if the old structure of the state was apparently inappropriate and – from reliable experience – not worth “repairing”, he should undertake reform immediately when he took office. The obstacles to reform are less great at the accession of a new ruler, because the subjects are prepared for the fact that they will have to suffer changes at such a time. Nevertheless, he should declare his plan to be only a “project” so that he could withdraw from it, if necessary, without loss of honour.²⁸

The same von Moser showed this in a later text, *Über die Regierung der geistlichen Staaten in Deutschland* (1787). For the ecclesiastic estates in Germany, he advocated “lasting improvements for the whole, transformation of land property, reforms, and if this word is not strong enough, revolution”. In fact during this period *revolution* became temporarily a synonym – with positive connotations – for an all-encompassing reform (*réforme universelle*) that was open to the future. Condillac, therefore, had already distinguished reform from the specific *correction* in the 1760s: “Pour corriger il suffit de faire quelques changements en mieux; pour réformer il faut tout changer.”²⁹ Further Condorcet declared in 1786, in stark contrast to Montesquieu shortly before, that legislation that followed the principles of enlightened reason regardless of any specific political constitution must be based everywhere on the same rational and natural principles and then would also produce everywhere the well-being of the people: “des lois . . . qui, toutes fondées sur la nature de l’homme et des sociétés, et déduites de ces principes par la raison doivent être partout les mêmes.”³⁰

The experience of the *terreur* and war in turn led to a clear semantic distinction between evolutionary inevitable reform, which had to be politically controlled, and violent revolution, as a rupture with the

past, which had to be politically prevented. This was at least Edmund Burke's position in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) which was foremost responsible for this conceptual change, and not only in Great Britain. In his home country the institutions had been continuously reformed and for Burke this was the reason why there had been no revolution with all its fatal consequences. As Joanna Innes has shown, however, the word *reform* (instead of *reformation*) had only become a political-institutional concept shortly before, around 1780. It was an oppositional claim against the government, especially in the demand for "parliamentary reform".³¹ In this volume Sebastian Meurer confirms and deepens this insight when examining the institutional implications of conceptual change. The conventional call for "reformation" had by definition left out the institutions that had to be considered impeccable as part of the "ancient constitution", even if they were temporarily impaired by the "corruption" of malicious individuals.

This constitutional conservatism changed only in the *Oeconomical Reform Debates* from 1779 onwards, when administrative reforms were expected to relieve both the national debt and the taxpayers. From then on *oeconomical reform* and *reform* in general, that could encompass the whole *system*, combined three institutional elements: parliamentary reform, administrative reform, and the consolidation of state finances. As an antonym to corruption *reform* thus became the solution to aberrations in both the moral-individual and institutional-systematic spheres, but the latter was the precondition of the former. Reforms thus should not only re-establish the commonwealth, but also promote it in the future, be it, if necessary, by far-reaching *improvements* or even *innovations*, since this word now had positive connotations. This was manifest in the definition, justification, and granting of public offices, where custom and individual privileges no longer secured claims against the criteria of efficiency and *rational reform*. Precedents and venerability, models and authorities, mere existence since time immemorial, lost their persuasive power, since times had changed and the political system had improved and therefore what had once been appropriate was required to prove that it still was so.

Generating and Endorsing Reform in the Public Sphere

The *philosophes* had already shared such convictions for a considerable time but even in France these assumptions became the fundamentals of political language and action only relatively late, in the last quarter of the century. One reason was the *philosophes'* opposition to many aspects of the French constitution and royal policy, where *reform* seemed to be a code word for arbitrary decisions and mobilised all kind of resistance, especially among the privileged such as the *noblesse d'épée*. Although experts agreed that the French military desperately needed reform, the word itself could no longer be used after an ambitious reform programme

had failed in 1777. *Change, restoration, correction, mending, adjusting*, and other words were used instead to better express respect for traditional structures.³² At the top level of the government the same reactions were manifest in the crisis of the 1780s, as Philippe Minard has pointed out.³³ When Turgot became minister in 1774, and thus the Enlightenment seemed to conquer the government, he tried to rebuild the economic system and base it on just principles, which should overcome blind opinion. This all-encompassing approach provoked opposition and mockery such as a satirical poem in 1775 which declared that everything was getting a new form and that all kinds of reforms were on everybody's lips: "Tout va prendre nouvelle forme, On ne parle que de réforme de mœurs, de temps".³⁴

Although close to the *philosophes*, Jacques Necker took a different, and much more cautious, starting point from his (so to speak) predecessor Turgot by proclaiming his rejection of any system of ideas ("esprit de systèmes").³⁵ Instead he declared his attachment to experience and facts. Another crucial difference was the two men's appreciation of the general public; in Turgot's opinion, they were largely ignorant and in need of good guidance. Necker, on the other hand, wanted to inform and consult public opinion, because he believed it to be reasonable: The discourse of reform became one of enlightened opinion. In his treatise *De l'administration des finances de la France*, Necker explained in 1784 that no one can govern without the support of public opinion: hence his insistence on the necessity to publicise reforms, and especially on political pedagogy. In the preambles of his edicts he explicitly committed himself to public explanation. Devolving a decisive role in reforms to the provincial administrations meant establishing them as an institutional place of intermediation with society.

It was crucial for the positive revaluation of *reform* that it was not regarded as an absolutist project or, as in the case of Maffei, as a matter for a small group of noblemen or *philosophes* who were deliberately to exclude broader circles in order to guarantee efficiency and to avoid endangering established balances of power. The public sphere played a decisive role in two respects: It made controversial debates about plans and ideas for the future possible and thus legitimised the reforms much better than could the more arcane traditional policy. In order to achieve this legitimacy the public at the same time forced the actors into an increasingly transparent use of language. Reforms could no longer be concealed or glossed over with the agreement of a sovereign who was willing to promote change; they had to be named and explained to a conservative audience and justified, with all their conditions and consequences. Reform became less a question of authority than of popular education. Languages of reform as they are studied in this volume reveal how the insistence on often vague models in the past gave way to concrete and therefore criticisable indications about how the future could be

shaped if the analysis of the present time was freely discussed and clear evidence (*lumières* in French) emerged.

Thus, alongside or against the creative will of the absolutist ruler appeared what August Ludwig Schlözer called the “despotism of truth, of facts, of publicity”: “These are certainly terrible despots, all-powerful like sultans and pashas, and indomitable, as long as there are people who can think or just be ashamed.”³⁶ Not the sovereign’s arbitrary decision, but truth, should dictate and legitimise reforms in the future. In a growing number of states diversity of opinions was no longer seen as a threat to (revealed) truth but as a precondition of (recognised) truth. Since the public sphere evolved as a market of opinions, arguments in favour of speculation and reform could be deeply interconnected, as Christine Zabel’s contribution shows. Advocates of a reform of the French commercial regime stressed the parallels between the economic market and the public forum of debating reforms, both extending the temporal dimension into an unknown future and both depending on freedom of action.

Addressing the public sphere meant using easy and straightforward language in order to maximise the acceptance of reform projects even among uneducated people such as peasants, as in the Bernese case discussed by Lisa Kolb and Lothar Schilling. It proves how important it is to go beyond texts from and for the elites to understand the successes and failures of reforms, which depended very greatly on popular reception and judgement. Less erudite usages of abstract concepts must, therefore, be studied as well as the adaptation of less sophisticated vocabularies, especially in the vernacular, even if they are no longer used nowadays in the political realm. Examples in this book are *Verbesserung* or *Aufnehmen* in German or the different and sometimes conflicting moral, social, economic, commercial, and fiscal aspects of *luxury* as presented by Cecilia Carnino who, like Franco Venturi, studies the interaction of political concepts as used in France and in Italy. She shows how the *Théorie du luxe* turns into a critical, even revolutionary tool in publications that first used it only in a descriptive and normative manner.

Looking at eighteenth-century translations, especially from Latin and French but increasingly also from English to other vernacular languages, highlights the connotations of words and helps us understand the contemporary interpretations of terms and discursive patterns. As Theo Jung shows in his contribution to this book, contemporaries understood the linguistic precision of different nations as an indicator of the level of civilisation they had reached. In the *Encyclopédie* Diderot stated, “just by comparing the vocabulary of a nation in different times, one may form an idea of its progress.”³⁷ The very fact of comparison and translation was a sign of the universalisation and systematisation of reform: What is valid in one state or civilisation can be transferred to and adopted in another one. Reflections on reform thus went beyond the lessons of the past, be it the classical models of Greece and Rome or a state’s own

mythical golden age, as in the case of Venice. There was also a universalistic dimension when extra-European, and especially Asian, states started to be used as examples, such as the ploughing Chinese emperor in Susan Richter's chapter. On the other hand, the Ottomans also started to study foreign models in the late eighteenth century and promoted changes *à l'europpéenne*, which is the topic of Pascal Firges in this volume. The example of less distant states such as England or Prussia could not only be used to advocate change, however, but also to discredit reform issues as "servile" or "childish imitations" of unpopular neighbours, against whom many French officers wanted to defend their "national spirit" (and noble prerogatives), which becomes clear in the contribution of Isabelle Deflers.

Besides geographical outreach another way to emancipate a state from the past and to systematise reform concepts was utopian thought, which in the eighteenth century became more down to earth and more technical than the encompassing social visions of More and Campanella. Already in the early eighteenth century, John Toland, although an admirer of republics in the past and the present, declared, "Harrington's *Oceana* is, in my opinion, the most perfect form of popular government that ever was". Still, unlike the historical republics, *Oceana* had never existed – or not outside Harrington's mind. Yet his intellectual conception and perspicuity were able, according to Toland, to conceive "the History, Reasons, Nature, and Effects of all sorts of Government".³⁸ In 1754 David Hume considered *Oceana* in a similar way to be "the only valuable model of a commonwealth that has yet been offered to the public", while authors such as Plato and More had conceived "plainly imaginary" plans of government, supposing "great reformation in the manners of mankind".

Without discussing human manners and morals at all, Hume preferred to present some concrete institutions from existing republics such as Switzerland (*militia*) or the "wise and renowned government" of the United Provinces. Notwithstanding his aversion to speculations in political philosophy, as quoted above, the result of these empirical studies was a general plan that could be applied wherever one would want to erect a commonwealth: "Let Great Britain and Ireland, or any territory of equal extent, be divided into 100 counties." If the country was narrower or greater, Hume explained how much the number of counties had to be diminished or increased.³⁹ Thus the *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth* became a rational model that could be applied everywhere with a few necessary modifications. Against his own will the concepts of perfection and perfectibility link the sober empiricist Hume to utopian thought, even though his pragmatic approach was deliberately limited to a few constitutional aspects and not to society as a whole.

Louis-Sébastien Mercier's utopian novel about Paris in the year 2440 (*L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais*) brought this idea of a perfect, i.e. rational, just, and moral society from a spatial into a temporal dimension,

giving long-term reform its direction. In the decades following the first edition Mercier was pleased to note which of his prognoses were realised: Reform had become a predictable project. In the third edition of 1798 he even claimed that his dream had announced and prepared for the French Revolution.

Never, I dare say, was a prediction closer to the event and at the same time more detailed on the amazing series of all these particular metamorphoses. I am therefore the true prophet of the revolution, and I say this without pride; providence gives each author in this world a good fortune.⁴⁰

Mercier's providence was no longer reserved for God nor was it merely that of the *vates*, the ancient poet and seer. It was the result of precise observation and rational analysis of grievances for which human reason could invent and implement reforms.

Reform Language and Revolutionary Rupture

When the reactionary Karl Ludwig von Haller, introduced in this volume by Béla Kaposy, looked back to the revolution and the *terreur*, he explained them by "the erroneous use of language" that had led to this regrettable temporary climax of the state's power of disposition, be it monarchical or republican. Haller lumped together Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and the Jacobins, since the concept of a social contract together with the republican terminology of Roman (private) law authorised the sovereign lawgiver to change the constitution at his will. To that end he might employ even violent means, but also the coercive strength of language: "The meaning of falsely applied words was forced onto things, whereas the terms ought to have been adapted to fit new circumstances."⁴¹ With respect neither for the anthropological and natural realities of the society nor for his own traditional moral and constitutional constraints and obligations, the sovereign could enhance his fiscal and military resources. Reform in the name of the common weal meant nothing more than expanding the state's authority to dispose of the nation's land and citizens, in the same way that Roman law had conceived of private property. At first it was enlightened despots such as Joseph II who implemented this reasoning, and then later the French republic, which was, thanks to popular sovereignty, far more absolute.

Contemporaries, and not only conservative ones, hence understood the ambivalence of languages of reform. On the one hand, their reasoning enhanced the sovereign's room for manoeuvre and, when the revolution broke out, the political participation of a growing part of the nation. On the other, everybody had to pay the price for growing public interventionism: more taxes and more legal constraints. As Wyger Velema shows

in this volume, sovereignty of the people, which was formally established in the United Provinces in 1798 and theoretically excluded the threat of monarchical rule by the stadholder, did not overcome the republican reservations regarding a unified and centralised political power. For their critics federalist separation of powers and direct-democratic procedures should tie back a representative government's addiction to reform to the will of a people that insisted on self-government and was sceptical about governmental initiatives, which always risked becoming expensive and over-adventurous.

It comes as no surprise that revolutionary language reacted to such reluctance with semantic shifts. For the early modern republics, the Swiss Confederation, and the United Provinces, *federalism* had been a constituent element, although the term had not yet been conceived. In French *confédération* or, in Montesquieu's words, *république fédérative* implied that its members united their forces in foreign and especially defensive policy while they remained autonomous in their internal affairs. As Manuela Albertone's chapter shows, *The Federalist Papers* (1787/88) introduced a rather confusing new aspect to the terminology, since the neologism *federalism* insisted on the augmented competences that the federation bestowed on the common institutions. Hence in the United States federalism came to signify a closer union and stronger government at the national level, while it denoted a defensive league with a weak government in the European tradition.

The French central state, which had grown under the monarchs and was legitimised and strengthened through revolutionary egalitarianism and popular sovereignty, opposed both the old European and the new American concept of what now was called federalism (*fédéralisme*). The Jacobins gave a negative ideological connotation to a term that previously had simply described a particular type of constitution (*fédération*) and had even held positive connotations for a spell during the revolution, especially in the 1790 *Fête de la Fédération*. When France became a modern republic, however, those who rejected the growing power of the new unitary central government were denigrated as *fédéralistes*, synonymous with secessionists and traitors. The Girondins, who were the main objects of this verdict against federalism, had promoted change and even very radical change since 1789. However, in the 1790s, the Jacobins claimed the omnipresent *révolution* and its practical constraints only for themselves, while *réforme* almost disappeared from public discourse. Languages of reform could no longer monopolise the claim for the betterment of the whole society by implementing rational insights into the nature of mankind. In times that asked for resolution they were associated with moderation and criticised therefore, becoming just one voice – and not always a very audible one – among many in a world split up among different political parties and ideologies, each with their own specific convictions on how change should be promoted and controlled.

Notes

1. K.L. von Haller, *De quelques dénominations de partis, pour servir à l'intelligence des journaux et de plusieurs autres écrits modernes* (Geneva: Guers Père, 1822), 42. On Haller and this quote, see Béla Kapossy in this volume.
2. Haller, *De quelques dénominations*, 30.
3. R. Koselleck, "'Space of Experience' and 'Horizon of Expectation': Two Historical Categories", in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, ed. R. Koselleck and K. Tribe (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255–275.
4. R. Koselleck, "Historia Magistra Vitae: The Dissolution of the Topos into the Perspective of a Modernized Historical Process", in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, ed. R. Koselleck and K. Tribe (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26–42.
5. Montesquieu, "De l'esprit des lois", in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. R. Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 2:380–381 (10, 4). "When a government has arrived at that degree of corruption as to be incapable of reforming itself, it would not lose much by being newly moulded".
6. *Ibid.*, 564–565 (19, 14).
7. *Ibid.*, 556 (19, 2). "That it is necessary people's minds should be prepared for the reception of the best laws."
8. *Ibid.*, 558–559 (19, 4–6). "Let them leave us as we are."
9. R. Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark As It Was in the Year 1692* (London: Goodswin, 1694), Preface, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/molesworth-an-account-of-denmark-with-francogallia-and-some-considerations-for-the-promoting-of-agriculture-and-employing-the-poor>. See also F. Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 53.
10. J.B. von Rohr, *Einleitung zur Staats-Klugheit, oder: Vorstellung wie christliche und weise Regenten zur Beförderung ihrer eigenen und ihres Landes Glückseligkeit Ihre Unterthanen zu beherrschen pflegen* (Leipzig: Martini, 1718), 549. See E. Wolgast, "Reform, Reformation", in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. O. Brunner, et al. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004), 5:340.
11. Rohr, *Einleitung*, 550.
12. For C.K.W. von Dohm, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden*, ed. W.C. Seifert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), 19, see Avi Lifschitz's chapter.
13. See Lina Weber's chapter for "Een goed borger wenscht de gesteldheid van den staat niet veranderd te zien" (1779–1780).
14. L. de Jaucourt, "Nouveauté", in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des arts, des sciences et des métiers*, ed. D. Diderot and J. le Rond d'Alembert (Paris, 1751–1772), 11:265–266. <https://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>.
15. Jaucourt, "Innovation", *Encyclopédie*, 8:755.
16. D. Hume, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth", in *Political Essays*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 221.
17. See Lina Weber's chapter.
18. See the edition and interpretation in P. Ulvioni, *Riforma il mondo: Il pensiero civile di Scipione Maffei* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2008), 371.
19. S. Maffei, in *Riforma*, 373–374, 381, 385, 395.
20. *Ibid.*, 397–399.
21. *Ibid.*, 413.
22. M. Foscarini, *Necessità della Storia e Della Perfezione della Repubblica*, ed. L. Ricaldone (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1983), 151–155.

23. F. Venturi, *Settecento riformatore: da Muratori a Beccaria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1969), 1:286–292.
24. A. Tron, “*Serenissimo principe . . .*”. *Il discorso del 29 maggio 1784, davanti al Senato della Serenissima, come testamento morale dell’aristocrazia veneziana*, ed. P. Gaspari (Udine: Istituto editoriale veneto friulano, 1994), 112, 124.
25. See Gregor Stiebert’s chapter for Harrach and the Protocoll of the Conferenz, 29 January 1748, in: *ÖZV II*, vol. 2, 196, for the quote.
26. J.H. Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexikon* (Leipzig; Halle: Zedler, 1746), 47: col. 86.
27. For L.-A. de Caraccioli, *Dictionnaire critique, pittoresque et sentencieux* (Lyon: B. Duplain, 1768), 8, see C. Dipper, “Réforme”, in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*, ed. R. Reichardt, et al. (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2000), 19-20:122.
28. F.C. von Moser, *Der Herr und der Diener geschildert mit Patriotischer Freyheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Raspe, 1759), 79–80.
29. For É.B. de Condillac, *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. G. Le Roy (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), 481; see Dipper, “Réforme”, 121.
30. N. de Condorcet, *Vie de M. Turgot* (London, 1786), 203.
31. J. Innes, “‘Reform’ in English Public Life: The Fortunes of a Word”, in *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780–1850*, ed. A. Burns and J. Innes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 71–97.
32. See the chapter from Isabelle Deflers in this volume.
33. P. Minard, “La ‘réforme’ en France et en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle. Sens et fortunes d’un mot d’ordre”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56, no. 4 (2009): 9.
34. For Bachaumont’s letter see Dipper, “Reform”, 122. “Everything will take on a new form. We are just talking about nothing else then the reform of morals and of [our] time.”
35. Minard, “La ‘réforme’”, 9.
36. A.L. Schlözer, *Stats-Anzeigen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1783), 5-20:516; see also W. Schulze, “Reform und Krise im Revolutionszeitalter”, in *Montgelas zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik: Krisendiagnostik, Modernisierungsbedarf und Reformpolitik in der Ära Montgelas und am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*, ed. K. Weigand (München: Utz, 2009), 22.
37. For Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, 5:637, see the chapter by Theo Jung.
38. J. Toland, “The Preface”, in *The Oceana and His Other Works*, ed. J. Harrington (Dublin: Smith and Bruce, 1737), IX.
39. Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, 222–223, 231.
40. L.-S. Mercier, *L’an deux mille quatre cent quarante* (Paris: Bresson et Carteret, 1798), Nouveau discours préliminaire.
41. K.L. von Haller, *Restauration der Staats-Wissenschaft* (Winterthur, 1820–1834; repr., Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1964), 1:91; see Kapossy’s chapter for the context and further references.

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