

5. The Pitfalls of Terminology

Uncovering the Paradoxical Roots of Early Modern History in American Historiography

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Some schemes of periodisation and their respective terminologies seem to be rather straightforward—to those who use them, to those who uphold them, but also to those who criticise them. This is certainly the case with the main periodisation of Western History: the division into Ancient, Medieval, and Modern History. This ordering of history is not only the most prominent periodisation scheme in today’s world, but also the most discussed, the best researched, and the most vigorously disproved. Many scholars have traced its origins either to the self-descriptions of living in a new age in the Italian Renaissance, or to the practice of textbook production at the turn of the eighteenth century.¹ Even more have commented on its deficiencies or even absurdities and on the ideological underpinnings of the whole system.² The widespread awareness that the concept of modern history does not only pertain to mere chronology, but rather to ideas about the essence of what it means to be modern and thus, by default, what is not modern has led to a “hesitation on the part of contemporary historians over using labels like ‘medieval,’ ‘modern,’ and ‘modernity’ ” as Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed.³ Despite the notorious difficulty in actually defining the ‘modern,’ historians seem to have a pretty clear notion of what is meant by it—or rather: what they think other historians mean or have meant by it when using the term. This tacit assumption, however, might not always correspond with a more complex reality.

- 1 See Horst Günther, “Neuzeit, Mittelalter, Altertum,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 6 (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 782–794.
- 2 See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Constantin Fasolt, “Hegel’s Ghost: Europe, the Reformation, and the Middle Ages,” *Viator* 39 (2008): 345–386.
- 3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “AHR Roundtable: The Muddle of Modernity,” *American Historical Review* (116): 663–675, 663. Cf. also the essay by Moshfeg in this volume.

In this paper I want to highlight the complexities behind what seems to be one of the basic aspects of Western historiography from the eighteenth to the twentieth century and beyond: distinguishing medieval from modern and pre-modern from modern. I will argue that even inside the Western tradition, these operations were far from uniform and that they were strongly conditioned by the differences in national historiographical and intellectual cultures. Furthermore, I will show how perplexing and counter-intuitive the terminology in periodisation can be—with historians using qualified versions of the term ‘modern’ when they actually meant ‘not-really-modern.’ These ambiguities are often overlooked by later interpreters (especially critics of established schemes of periodisation), who often presuppose a stability of meaning in epochal terminology over long time spans and neglect the historians’ capacity for constant reinterpretation of these terms. To illuminate these points, I will provide a case study: the hitherto overlooked emergence of early modern history as a distinct field of research in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

The field of early modern history is a particularly good example for studying the cultural determination of periodisation schemes and their variations even inside the Western tradition itself. During the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, two models existed side by side: the tripartite division into ancient, medieval, and modern history prevalent in the English-speaking world, as well as in Central and Northern Europe; and the French tradition of dividing history into four parts, thus splitting modern history into *histoire moderne* and *histoire contemporaine* with the French Revolution as the dividing line. This scheme was adopted by Italian, Spanish and other romance-language historians. For a long time, the curious fact that French ‘modern history’ actually ended in 1789 was not remarked upon. When homogenization was attempted, however, the two traditions clashed. In 1964, the European Council commissioned a book on European history with the goal of ‘denationalising’ historiography. In the German version, the entry on contemporary history by the Belgian medievalist Emile Lousse (1905–1986) and the Italian modernist Mario Bendiscioli (1903–1998) started with the following definition: “In der traditionellen vierteiligen Aufgliederung der Geschichte bezeichnet der Ausdruck die ‘Neueste Zeit’ die Periode, die der Neuzeit folgt.”⁴ In English this would read as: “In the traditional quadripartite division of history the term ‘contemporary times’ (literally: newest time/era) denominates the period that follows the modern era (literally: new time/era).” While this assertion was

4 Mario Bendiscioli, and Emile Lousse, “Neueste Zeit,” in: *Grundbegriffe der Geschichte* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1964), 267; they did, in fact, reflect on the terminological and conceptual problem of ‘modern’ in their contribution on “età moderna.” See the Italian version Mario Bendiscioli, and Emile Lousse, “Età moderna,” *Internationales Jahrbuch für Geschichtsunterricht* 7 (1959/60): 254–262.

obvious for French- and Italian-speaking historians, its translation into German or English renders it almost incomprehensible, if not bordering on the absurd: neither had there ever been a traditional division of history into four parts in German- or English-language historiography, nor was there any notion that the *Neuzeit* or the 'modern era' had ended and been followed by an even newer and different historical epoch. A translator more knowledgeable about recent developments in the field might have solved the linguistic and substantive conundrum by using the term *Frühe Neuzeit* or 'early modern history.' That the translator and the dictionary's editors did not use these terms clearly shows that they had not gained general currency in German historiography in the early 1960s.

The emergence of 'early modern history' as a concept, especially in German, British, and American historiography, is traditionally situated in the second half of the twentieth century.⁵ The first two post-war decades are seen as a time of gestation, of isolated usage of the term and rare attempts at defining early modern as a historical period. The 1970s, then, serve as a pivotal decade initiating widespread usage, first book series such as the *Cambridge Studies in Early Modern History* (the first volume of the series was published in 1970), or, in Germany, university chairs officially denominated for *Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*. In addition, a number of book titles from the 1970s were extremely influential for the perception of the label 'early modern' in the English-speaking world: Peter Burke's *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe* (1972), his *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), and Natalie Zemon Davis' *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) linked the label both to the questions and methods of the French Annales School and to the emerging new cultural history. During the last decades of the twentieth century, this had the effect of attaching a certain meaning to 'early modern' that transcended the basic *chronological* operation of denoting the time from around 1500 to around 1800. Instead, it became a watchword for a methodological choice. Especially in the United States scholars in history and other humanities used the term as a battle cry against the Renaissance or rather, against the research agenda associated with the term Renaissance. In this

5 See generally and critically Wolfgang Reinhard, "The Idea of Early Modern History," in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 2002), 281–292; Randolph Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle," *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002): 296–307. For Germany Winfried Schulze, "Von den großen Anfängen des neuen Welttheaters: Entwicklung, neuere Ansätze und Aufgaben der Frühneuzeitforschung," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 44 (1993): 3–18; Thomas Maissen, "Seit wann und zu welchem Zweck gibt es die Frühe Neuzeit," in *Neue Wege der Forschung: Antrittsvorlesungen am Historischen Seminar Heidelberg, 2000–2006*, ed. Stefan Weinfurter (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 129–153. A much longer view is taken by Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity 2010).

understanding, ‘early modern’ was to signify an interest in popular instead of elite culture, approaches to history informed by anthropology, constructivism and scepticism towards linear development.⁶

While Renaissance scholars fought a losing battle against the fashionable term, it was not until the turn of the millennium that the slightly postmodern reading of ‘early modern’ was challenged from a postmodernist position. Focusing on the presence of the word ‘modern’ in ‘early modern,’ cultural historians now began to question the term, its meaning and its usage.⁷ This question had not bothered historians before, even though it lay hidden in plain sight. With some irony Peter Burke had already alluded to it in 1978, in the introduction to his *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*: “The period with which this book is concerned runs from about 1500 to about 1800. In other words, it corresponds to what historians often call the ‘early modern’ period, even when they deny its modernity.”⁸ But it was not until the late 1990s that the charge emerged, that ‘early modern’ not only meant modernity in disguise, but that the term and concept had originally been framed to refer to modernity and the process of modernisation.⁹ This reading seemed to be underpinned by chronology: ‘early modern’ as a terminology emerged almost in tandem with modernisation theory and its impact on the writing of history. Even though the term and concept do not feature prominently among the major authorities of modernisation theory proper, it is not hard to find it in use among historians from the 1960s onwards, who stressed the ‘already modern’ features of early modern Europe or even the early modern world.

In the following pages, I want to present a different chronology. I contend that ‘early modern’—as a term and concept—was actually already well established in the United States by 1950 as its actual widespread usage can be found in and traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, and that its meaning at the time was akin to ‘pre-modern,’ or

- 6 See Starn, “Early Modern Muddle” (see note 5), and Leah S. Marcus, “Renaissance/Early Modern Studies,” in: *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), 41–63.
- 7 James A. Parr, “A Modest Proposal: That We Use Alternatives to Borrowing (Renaissance, Baroque, Golden Age) and Leveling (Early Modern) in Periodization,” *Hispania* 84 (2001): 406–416; Terence Cave, “Locating the Early Modern,” *Paragraph* 29 (2006): 12–26; Moshe Sluhovskiy, “Discernment of Difference, the Introspective Subject, and the Birth of Modernity,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006): 169–199. For Germany see Arndt Brendecke, “Eine tiefe, frühe, neue Zeit: Anmerkungen zur *hidden agenda* der Frühneuzeitforschung,” in *Die Frühe Neuzeit: Revisionen einer Epoche*, ed. Andreas Höfele, Jan-Dirk Müller, and Wulf Oesterreicher (Göttingen: de Gruyter, 2013), 29–45.
- 8 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Smith 1978), Prologue.
- 9 Starn: “Early Modern Muddle” (see note 5), 299; Sebastian Conrad, “Doppelte Marginalisierung: Plädoyer für eine transnationale Perspektive auf die deutsche Geschichte,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 28 (2002): 145–169, 149.

‘not-modern,’ rather than being used to denote an early phase of Modernity. Some of the post-World War II comments about the modernity of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries have to be understood as a reaction to this view. This was only rarely acknowledged at the time. An exception was the 1972 textbook *Early Modern Europe 1500/1789* that appeared in William McNeill’s *World Civilization Series*. The author, historian of France John B. Wolf (1907–1996), had started his teaching career in 1934 and had thus experienced the historiographical developments of almost four decades: “Until 1945,” he began his overview, “American texts customarily presented the history of early modern Europe as a dismal era of absolutism, marked by tyranny, social injustice, and senseless war fought for the personal glory or dynastic interests of princes. This was in nice contrast to the Renaissance, presented as a period of individualism, or the French Revolution, seen as the opening of modern times.” His own book, in contrast, was “intended as an introduction to the three centuries after 1500, a period vital in the formation of institutions of western society.”¹⁰

When historical scholarship began at American universities in the nineteenth century, it was generally based on the classic tripartite division of history. In the practice of teaching history and of hiring academic historians, however, the main division was the one between Americanists, working on colonial and United States history, and Europeanists, working on European history, regardless of the period they were specialising in. Ideologically, the Teutonic Germ theory and, after its demise, the continuity of English constitutional history bound both camps together, until the growth of the field of American history and the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis severed the ties between them. At the turn of the century, ideas about historical continuity overrode the idea of strict epochal divisions among the Europeanists; furthermore, their small number at any given institution and the need for undergraduate survey courses led to strong overlaps between medievalists and modernists. Until World War I, the single general session on European history at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association indiscriminately featured papers on both periods.

This changed in the second decade of the twentieth century. The differentiation of medieval and modern history culminated in the founding of the journals *Speculum* (1926) and the *Journal of Modern History* (1929). The latter’s scope was the entirety of the ‘modern period’ in its traditional sense: “the history of Europe and its expansion from the Renaissance to the close of the World War,” as the first issue declared. At that point, however, the meaning of ‘modern history’ itself had already come under scrutiny. Was it just a random name for the time since 1500, or did ‘modern’ here indicate a specific affinity to the present, delineating a time of special significance for the modern, i.e. the contemporary world? And if so: when did it actually start?

10 John B. Wolf, *Early Modern Europe 1500/1789* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1972), Preface.

The redefinition of modern history in American historiography can largely be attributed to the movement of ‘New’ or ‘Progressive History’ and its concept of presentism—that is, seeing the sense of any engagement with history in understanding the present or even in helping to solve the problems of the present.¹¹ In 1907, James Harvey Robinson (1863–1936) and Charles Beard (1874–1948), both at Columbia University at the time, published a co-authored textbook titled *The Development of Modern Europe. An Introduction to the Study of Current History*. While it appeared five years before James Harvey Robinson’s famous *New History*,¹² which gave the movement one of its names, the joint textbook can be seen as its first major manifestation. The subtitle already contains the clue. Not only does this book merge modern and current history, it already hints at the Progressive Historians’ conception of the utility of history (both in the sense of *res gestae* and historiography): fostering a better understanding of the current world. “It has been a common defect of our historical manuals,” the authors state at the start their own manual, “that, however satisfactorily they have dealt with more or less remote periods, they have ordinarily failed to connect the past with the present.” Their solution was simple: “In preparing the volume in hand, the writers have consistently subordinated the past to the present. It has been their ever-conscious aim to enable the reader to catch up with his own times.”¹³

What did this mean for the temporal scope of the history to be studied? “Obviously no special date can be fixed as the starting point of our story, for in some instances it will be necessary to go farther back than in others in seeking light on the present. ... In general, however, Europe of to-day can be quite well understood if the wonderful achievements since the opening of the eighteenth century are properly grasped.”¹⁴ The early eighteenth century seems to be a compromise between the two authors: while Beard saw the beginning of modernity mainly in the economic changes generated by the Industrial Revolution, the intellectual historian Robinson emphasised the scientific achievements of the seventeenth century.

At any rate, a number of differing timelines existed, even among the New Historians. What united them was their common understanding of the momentous shift in world history that had occurred around or since 1800. They even tried to outdo each other in finding the most evocative illustrations for this. The maverick Harry Elmer Barnes (1889–1968) posited in 1924: “George Washington [would] be far more at home on an Egyptian estate in the days of Tut-ankh-amen than in Richmond,

11 See Ernst Breisach, *American Progressive History: An Experiment in Modernization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).

12 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York: Macmillan, 1912).

13 James Harvey Robinson, Charles A. Beard, *The Development of Modern Europe: An Introduction to the Study of Current History* (Boston: Ginn, 1908), iii.

14 Robinson, *The Development of Modern Europe*, 2–3.

Virginia, today.”¹⁵ The great sceptic Carl Becker (1873–1945) used a similar image in his *Modern History* (1932): “If Socrates could have come to life in Paris in 1776, many things would have seemed strange to him; but he would not have had much trouble in making himself at home there. If Benjamin Franklin should enter Philadelphia today, with or without a loaf of bread under his arm, he would be less at home in his old home town after two hundred years than Socrates would have been in Paris after two thousand years.”¹⁶ A year later Becker rephrased the thought in intellectually more challenging terms in his *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-century Philosophers*—which was to become the most important American text on the Enlightenment for three decades and the main opponent of Peter Gay’s project of resurrecting the value of the Enlightenment. “We are accustomed,” Becker declared, “to think of the eighteenth century as essentially modern in its temper.” After listing a number of commonly offered arguments for this view, he acknowledged: “All very true. . . . And yet, I think the philosophers were nearer the Middle Ages, less emancipated from the preconceptions of medieval Christian thought, than they quite realized or we have commonly supposed.”¹⁷

The gist of these quotations is obvious: from the first decade of the twentieth century onwards, American historians of Europe started to disavow the classic definition of modern history as our own era that had begun around 1500. Instead, they posited that the contemporary world had only come into being in any recognisable form much more recently, be it in the seventeenth century or the early or even late eighteenth century. The preceding history was relegated to an almost perennial pre-modernity encompassing the millennia from Tutankhamun or Socrates to the birth of modernity. Mirroring the zenith of Progressive History, this historiographic development reached its first height in the 1920s and the 1930s.

Incidentally, however, these were the same decades that witnessed the breakthrough of the terms ‘early modern age,’ ‘early modern times’ or ‘early modern history.’ While they had existed since the 1880s, and had been used with increasing frequency since the turn of the century, it was not until the interwar years that they came to be widely employed in academic texts, in titles of articles, in university course descriptions, and even in professional job descriptions.¹⁸ In certain instances, the very same

15 Harry Elmer Barnes, History and Social Intelligence, *Journal of Social Forces* 2 (1924): 121–164, 154–155.

16 Carl Becker, *Modern History: The Rise of a Democratic, Scientific, and Industrialised Civilization* (New York: Silver, Burett, 1931), 3.

17 Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 29.

18 The instances of usage are actually so many to make a full itemisation impossible. A few examples will suffice: Lynn Thorndike, “The Blight of Pestilence on Early Modern Civilization,” *American Historical Review* 32 (1927): 455–474, and his “The Survival of Mediaeval Intellectual Interests into

people who argued for the relatively recent onset of modern times, used the term ‘early modern’ endemically in their writing. The most striking example is the aforementioned Harry Elmer Barnes, who is now either forgotten or only remembered for his role in revisionist history concerning the World Wars, eventually becoming the main intellectual sponsor of Holocaust denial in post-war America. Before 1940, however, he had been a major figure in American historiography publishing widely in journals and with prestigious publishing houses.¹⁹ As a student of James Harvey Robinson at Columbia, and a teacher at the New School for Social Research, formed by Robinson and some of his colleagues when they walked out of Columbia, Barnes had taken the gospel of Progressive History to heart. In fact, he was the self-appointed attack-dog of Progressive History, taking the polemics against established history and for the inclusion of the social sciences in the 1920s and 1930s to such extremes that it embarrassed even most of his ideological allies.

Barnes was able to combine a fervent belief in the novelty of modern civilisation with a concept of development in the preceding centuries: “the supplanting of medieval civilization by early modern culture and institutions between 1500 and 1800.”²⁰ Always the deliberate iconoclast, however, Barnes disparaged the well-established narrative of the transforming nature of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Taking his cue from his teacher Robinson, he painted them instead as reactionary movements. The truly progressive development in early modern times could not be grasped without understanding the “overwhelming importance of the expansion of Europe” and the colonial reverberations on European civilisation, he argued.²¹ In this way, Barnes created and fervently proclaimed the existence of an ‘early modern period’ that was a necessary step from medieval times to modernity—but unmistakably distinct from Modernity proper.

Early Modern Times”, *Speculum* 2 (1927): 147–159 were the first articles with this title in major American historical journals. When Thorndike came back to Columbia in 1924 he immediately offered a course on “Intellectual History of Early Modern Times” (*Isis* 7 [1925], 109); in the same year R. Packard started a “Seminar in Early Modern History” at Smith College (*Catalogue of Smith College, 1924–1915*, 115). In 1933 Bernadotte Schmitt, Professor at Chicago and editor of the *Journal of Modern History*, complained to a colleague that “we have been searching for years for a man in the early modern field without much success.” (Bernadotte Schmitt to Conyers Read, 31. January 1933, Univ. of Chicago Archive, Department of History Records 1910–1963, Box 5, F. 4.)

19 See Justus D. Doenecke, “The New History and the New Sociology: Harry Elmer Barnes,” *Social Science* 53 (1978): 67–77. Leonard Krieger, “European History in America,” in: *History: The Development of Historical Studies in the United States*, ed. John Higham, with Leonard Krieger and Felix Gilbert (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 261, 271.

20 Harry Elmer Barnes, “The Historical and Institutional Setting of the Second World War,” *Social Science* 16 (1941), 230–236, 231.

21 Harry Elmer Barnes, “Economic Science and Dynamic History,” *Journal of Social Forces* 3 (1924), 37–56, 56.

Other Progressive Historians interested in this period of European history were even less sanguine about the modernity of early modern times. Pride of place must be given to the views of James Harvey Robinson, godfather of the New History and prolific teacher of cohorts of Progressive Historians at Columbia. Trained as a medievalist, he came to emphasise the retarding elements in the religious and institutional life of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. Only in the realm of science did he finally glimpse the emergence of a 'modern way' from the late seventeenth century onwards. This argument was further pursued by Lynn Thorndike, his former student and quasi-successor at Columbia. Thorndike led the 'revolt of the medievalists' (W. K. Ferguson) in the history of science, asserting the long continuity of scientific development and vigorously refuting any claims of an intellectual breakthrough in the Renaissance and Reformation periods.²² In fact, this man who first used 'early modern' in a title in the *American Historical Review*, spent most of his working life disproving the modernity of his chosen field of interest. His 1927 AHR-article began with the sobering observation: "The period that we have been too apt to glorify as an age of renaissance, of reformation, of discovery, was in many ways—for we must also remember the insane wars of religion and of ambitious monarchs—a time of setback, stagnation, distress, and abject misery."²³

Surveying the views of the Progressive Historians in the 1920s and 1930s, it becomes obvious that there are two models in conceiving the 'early modern.' The first one asserts the continuity of European developments, in institutions, in habits, in modes of thought—until the cataclysmic eruption of modernity that occurred at some point between the middle of the seventeenth and the end of the eighteenth century, depending on the historian's preferences. This, basically, is the concept that later came to be known as "Old Europe" (Dietrich Gerhard) or the "long Moyen Âge" (Jacques Le Goff).²⁴ The other model was based on the construction of an early modern period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, perceived as a necessary stepping stone to the genuine modern world. This, of course, is the model that has largely become established in international historiography. Looking at the interwar period, however, it would be misleading to emphasise the disagreements between the exponents of both models and the competition between the two. Rather, they were united in proposing a totally new framing of modern history that was more akin to the French *histoire contemporaine* than to a traditional modern history/*Geschichte der Neuzeit*.

This affinity is mirrored in terminology: Historians of both persuasions would use 'early modern' to describe the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, regardless of

22 Lynn Thorndike, "Renaissance or Prenaissance," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1943), 65–74.

23 Thorndike, "Blight of Pestilence" (see note 18), 455.

24 Dietrich Gerhard, *Old Europe: A Study of Continuity, 1000–1800* (New York: Academic Press, 1981); Jacques Le Goff, *Un long Moyen Âge* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004).

whether they believed them to be inherently pre-modern or at least in some ways proto-modern. Apparently, the almost innocuous word ‘early’ sufficed to categorically differentiate these centuries from the ‘proper’ modern age. During the interwar years, this mode of shortening the modern age was specifically American; no comparable development took place in British or German historiography. It was, in fact, a result of the general impact of American political and intellectual culture on the nation’s historiography. The valorisation of industrial society and of democracy led the Progressive Historians to challenge the traditional view of modern history. Conversely, in the more state-centred European societies historians defined modernity primarily in terms of state-building and the modern state system. On that basis they perpetuated the concept of a long modern age/*Neuzeit*.²⁵

As indicated at the beginning, the object of this chapter is not merely to chart the periodisation choices of American historians of Europe in the interwar period, but also to generate lessons from this case study about the terminology and the intricacies of historiographical periodisation more generally. In my view, four salient observations emerge from this example:

1. The first observation must be phrased as a warning (and a call for critical periodisation models as demanded by Jörn Rüsen²⁶): one must beware of seemingly self-evident terminology. For many critics and interpreters of the label ‘early modern’, it seemed so obvious that it had been coined in the context of modernisation theory that they did not deem it necessary to verify this claim by thoroughly examining the term’s actual usage. Such an analysis would have uncovered the rich and varied early history of usages of ‘early modern’ as historical terminology. The counter-intuitive realisation that the historians who coined the term ‘early modern’ were actually convinced of the lack of modernity in these centuries and wanted to convey this reading, does not disprove any possible *later* association of ‘early modern’ and modernisation. It does, however, contradict the assumption that this association is intrinsically attached to the term itself.
2. The second observation pertains to the question of why these interwar historians chose to silently introduce a rather bland qualification of ‘modern history,’ instead of generating a more definitive term. Apparently, the reason is the immense staying power of established *chronological* terminology, in this case ‘modern history.’ For many of the protagonists in this chapter, it would

25 The reasons for this divergence will be discussed in detail in my forthcoming book *Die Frühe Neuzeit der Moderne: die Entstehung einer Epoche in Deutschland, Großbritannien und den USA*.

26 See his chapter in this volume.

have made sense to drop the label ‘modern’ altogether. They did not do it, nor did they ever consider it, neither in their publications nor, as far as we know, in their private correspondence. They were content with splitting off the ‘early modern’ from the ‘modern’ and did not ruminate about the residual meaning of the word they were using. Applying the established label and just qualifying it, made its propagation and professional communication much easier. The validity of this assumption can be proven best by invoking the later unsuccessful attempts to introduce new periods that would have broken up the established ones. The aforementioned case of ‘Old Europe,’ put forward by Dietrich Gerhard in Germany and the United States, testifies both to the sheer difficulty of establishing a new label and to the path-dependency of periodisation schemes, once they are ingrained institutionally.

Because of its seamless connection to established periodisation, the label ‘early modern’ generated no antipathy. Its very vagueness and ostensive familiarity opened the field for everyone to use it, in genetic variation, so to speak,²⁷ as they pleased. So, from the 1930s onwards, the economic historian John U. Nef (1899–1988) would use the term consistently to stress the modernity of these centuries without ever commenting on the profound differences between his and e.g. Lynn Thorndike’s understanding of the term.²⁸

3. This example leads directly to the third observation: chronological terminology has—if it is not totally unambiguous—a remarkable capacity for reinterpretation. It can gradually change both the time frame it is supposed to delineate and its ideological underpinnings. This observation does beg the question whether a total detachment of a term from its semantic origin is actually possible.²⁹ In the case of early modern history, this is hotly debated between practicing historians who claim to be using ‘early modern’ without any residues of the term ‘modern,’ and critics of the term who deem just that impossible. The historical evidence seems to suggest that historians are actually quite capable of using terms of periodisation (or certain *chronotypes*) in idiosyncratic and therefore even distorting ways.³⁰
4. The fourth observation concerns cultural differences in periodisation and the value in exploring them, not only on a global scale, but also inside the Western tradition. As with any other historiographical operation, periodisation choices reflect contemporary ideas, pre-occupations, or ideologies. Looking closely

27 See chapter 2 by Jörn Rüsen.

28 See John U. Nef, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1932).

29 On this topic cf. Thomas Maissen and Barbara Mittler, *Why China did not have a Renaissance and why that matters* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018).

30 See Justus Nipperdey, “Die Terminologie von Epochen: Überlegungen am Beispiel Frühe Neuzeit/early modern,” *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 38 (2015): 170–185.

at the practice, therefore, offers a lens into these wider intellectual traits of specific societies. This circumstance has been put to use to analyse western periodisation as a whole, or to trace the chronological development of certain time-concepts—e.g. the Renaissance or the Enlightenment—in relation to the respective intellectual *Zeitgeist*. Rarely, however, have the subtle differences in periodisation between the national historiographies of Europe and the Americas—or other parts of the world—been used to understand their respective conceptions of past and present.³¹ The contrast between the contested nature of modern history in interwar American historiography and its hardly questioned prevalence in Europe, reveals much more about these societies than the mundane business of splitting up time may suggest. Disentangling the multiple histories of periodisation, as suggested here, need therefore not be denigrated as an instance of historiographical navel-gazing, but rather sheds light on the differing self-perceptions of specific societies and their respective cultures of narrating history.

31 One example for an attempt in this direction is Maissen and Mittler, *Why China did not have a Renaissance* (see note 29).