Horizon

Horizons of Time

In the modern world, we are more than used to considering the horizon as the trope par excellence for the future. Used progressively since the nineteenth century by philosophers, historians, and theorists, and vulgarised by journalists and businessmen, it has almost ceased to be perceived as a metaphor. The figurative use of this geographical concept, however, only became possible from the moment when the future in the abstract began to be conceived as an open, inner-worldly period, capable of encompassing everything that might happen to an individual, a society, or the whole world in the times ahead.1 This could only occur after a significant part of the human race – with the age of discoveries and the building of the first great transoceanic empires – began gradually to imagine themselves immersed in a space-time continuum that encompassed the entire globe.

With the advance of modernity, the unstable equilibrium between the three phases of time clearly tilted in favour of the future – a future that appeared to be increasingly mouldable by human action. The phenomenon can be observed on many levels, from the expansion of a specific vocabulary in relation to the future to the cult of progress, the futurisation of history writing, the rise of utopianism, and the characterisation of politics and philosophy as two spheres of thought and action specialised – each in its own way – in planning the future. In this new political and intellectual environment, philosophers like Martin Heidegger and José Ortega y Gasset insisted on the notion of “project” and on “futurition” as a fundamental structure of human life. “Living,” Ortega would say, “is feeling oneself shot towards the future.”2 And in the second half of the twentieth century, the long, slow agony of faith in progress did not preclude a steady increase in interest in scrutinising and controlling the collective future (let us recall that the neologism “futurology” began to be disseminated in the media from 1960 onwards).

It was in this modern context of concern about the future that the notion of horizon adopted a temporal aspect and a sense of opening. Along with the habitual uses, linked to visual experience and everyday geography, referring to the line where the sky appears to meet the earth, and also the spherical section of the world globe delimited by that circumference, the word horizon began to be used figuratively in certain contexts to denote the mobile frontier – which the triumphant vision of
progress believed was permanently advancing towards an open future of increasing improvement – between the real, the existing, the experienced, and that which did not yet exist but could materialise in the short, medium, or long term. In parallel fashion to what occurred with other spatial terms of this nature – utopia or progress, for example – the temporalisation of the word horizon made it possible to subsume under it the set of possibilities and scenarios that might be anticipated in any given situation or area, thus signifying not only a physical limit or insurmountable barrier, but also, and principally, a range of more or less achievable hopes, expectations, intentions, and forecasts (in fact, when the cultivators of Begriffsgeschichte invoke the horizon in an explanatory context, they usually do so to emphasize the performative dimension of concepts as factors of social praxis, though it should not be forgotten that they constitute limits to possible experience and to conceivable theory). This semantic broadening towards the temporal therefore involved adding new dynamics and expansive meaning to a word that had previously alluded almost exclusively to the maximum scope in essentially spatial and closed terms (ὅρος means boundary). And, as the reading of some early modern texts allows us to glimpse, it was geographical and scientific discoveries that, by connecting spatial expansion and temporal progression, rendered possible this semantic extension by metaphorical means.

This semantic trend, typical of modernity, which consists in temporalizing spatial concepts, would have begun with the notion of “the present,” upon which the concept of horizon largely depended. For if we think of the primitive present–here (praesens = being there) as present–now, and we conceive of its temporal dynamics as an incessant movement forward, the horizon will almost automatically come to refer not only to the line where the land or sea seems to meet the sky, but also to what might happen in the future and, more abstractly, to a permanently expanding range of possibilities. Yet, as Karl Mannheim saw, this range of possibilities in turn entails two very different horizons. First, an ordinary horizon of expectations that encompasses the foreseeable, although it always leaves a gap for unforeseen facts. However, especially in times of turmoil, it is also possible to conceive of an anomalous, disruptive, and unfathomable horizon, in which genuinely unimaginable things could occur, including major structural alterations that would imply a systemic change.
Vertical Horizons

There is in this respect another facet of the horizon, as yet little explored by historiography, that I should like to mention. Curiously, as it acquired semantic breadth and was temporalised (a process that only appears fully to have developed after the Second World War), the horizon partly lost its horizontality. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the horizon ceased to be only horizontal and became a vertical concept, too. Firstly in the field of geology, and then in archaeology, the term horizon began to be applied to the diverse strata, layers, or levels superimposed below the earth’s surface. Thus people began to speak of stratigraphic, edaphic, and archaeological horizon (later it was also applied to stadial or developmental disciplines such as embryology or psychology). And, with the transfer to the theory of history via metaphors, these new meanings made it possible easily to criss-cross the two meanings in both directions: the diachronic extension of the temporal horizon and the depth of a specific synchronic horizon. Thanks to these novel uses of the word horizon, historiography in general and the history of concepts in particular had at their disposal an invaluable theoretical tool, consisting above all in a privileged point of articulation between synchrony and diachrony that helps us to think about the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (the truth is, however, that to date, these new dimensions of the trope have seldom been explored by scholars).

So, when Gadamer or Koselleck, in Husserl’s footsteps, employ in their theories the heuristics of the horizon – which has, among others, the advantage of its implicit perspectivism, for one always looks out over the horizon or performs an excavation from a given standpoint – thus undertaking the spatialisation of time, they are really making the return journey. Figuratively temporalised in the modern period, the concept of horizon can easily be (re-)spatialized by means of a regressive (counter-)metaphor that returns it to its original literality. Playing with both dimensions, time can be imagined as a horizon because previously the horizon was obliquely thought of as time. Of course, what is then most noticeable about the horizon is not so much its (traditional) facet of limit as its productive and plural aspects, since each horizon of meaning, which can be criss-crossed, provides one of various contexts of interpretation.

Moreover, two of Koselleck’s most celebrated historical categories – “horizon of expectation” and “layers of time” – both unequivocally modern (I am sure that neither of these expressions would have been fully understood by speakers three centuries ago) – point toward a unified metaphorics: none other than that of the
horizon, understood either in its primary definition – horizontal, geographical, linear – in the first case, or in its secondary meaning – vertical, geological, tridimensional – in the second.7

Meanwhile, the Gadamerian poetics of the fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung), by pluralising points of view, situating them in time, and creating a dialogue between them, points to the inescapable historicity of comprehension. This image (to which Pickering has retorted,8 on the basis of Bakhtin’s alternative proposal, which makes it possible to hold distinct horizons apart), helps us, in my view, to understand the complex dynamics of historical times, and, in particular, the hermeneutics of changing horizons of pasts, presents, and futures. And I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that all historical semantics pivot on the dialogical link between these ephemeral horizons of present pasts, withered presents, and past futures that we have to translate, retranslate, and rewrite as they all sink inexorably into the abyss of time.

**Horizons of History**

The use and abuse of the horizon metaphor by historians and philosophers underwent some ups and downs throughout the nineteenth century.9 On the threshold of the last quarter of the century, Friedrich Nietzsche warned against the harmful consequences of the excess of history. A continuous displacement of horizon-perspectives, he said, weakened the spirit of the young: “every living thing can become healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon.”10

The metaphor of the horizon is more or less harmoniously associated with a network of tropes with which it has an undoubted affinity, such as the poetics of terra incognita and of the frontier. The former is closely linked with discoveries and the challenge of the unexplored, but also with the spirit of conquest and utopian imagination. As for the frontier, if there is a country where this trope has so captured people’s imagination that they have made it an emblem of their nation, that is without a doubt the USA. A not insignificant contribution in this respect was that made by the “Frontier Thesis” launched by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. Turner is known to have regarded American history essentially as a westward expansion. Half a century earlier, the coiner of the idea of Manifest Destiny, John O’Sullivan, combined spatial with temporal language, mixing a vulgarised progressive philosophy of history with fledgling nationalism. In one of his articles, O’Sullivan wrote, for instance: “The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space.”11
The Hegelian-like metaphor that identifies certain individuals, cities, or nations with the prow or ram of history, and later of the avant-garde, is obviously closely related to the metaphoricities of the horizon, where History is understood, in the modern sense, as humanity’s voyage on the ocean of time. Needless to say, in our age of incredulity towards metanarratives, much of this metaphoricities has grown obsolete.

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3 As Koselleck wrote, “Each concept establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets a limit.” See Reinhart Koselleck, “Begriffsgeschichte and Social History,” in Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time [1979], translated from German by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 75–92, here 86. A simple tally of the number of occurrences of the word horizon in Koselleck’s collection of essays Futures Past yields the following results. Out of a total of 56 occurrences, the vast majority (41) – a large number of which, as might be expected, appear in the last essay, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories” – refer in one way or another to the “horizon of expectation,” including prognosis and planning of the future, while barely a dozen refer to the horizon understood as a limit, as a interpretative framework or semantic horizon. See Reinhart Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories,” in Futures Past, 255–275.
However much, in its technical definition enshrined by phenomenology, a visual horizon or specific threshold may be transcended by marching forward, or simply by moving from one observation point to another higher one, the word horizon appears to retain, almost by definition, a certain nuance that alludes to the inaccessible, like that imaginary line on the earth’s surface that recedes as one advances towards it and that, therefore, we can never reach. On this see Niklas Luhmann, “The Future Cannot Begin: Temporal Structures in Modern Society,” Social Research 43, no. 1 (1976), 130–152, and the Soviet joke told by Koselleck in ‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’, 261. It is no less true, however, that the typically modern attitude has considered the ἀποκ – whether spatial or temporal – a movable, provisional limit, in the manner of a challenge to be overcome again and again by a regularly renewed plus ultra. See Javier Fernández-Sebastián, “Semper Plus Ultra. Modernidad y transgresión,” in Metafóricas espacio-temporales para la historia. Enfoques teóricos e historiográficos, ed. Javier Fernández Sebastián and Faustino Oncina. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2021, 311–334.

The Portuguese Jesuit António Vieira, who spent most of his life in Brazil, drew this analogy between global time and space at the beginning of his História do futuro, written in 1649: “Time, like the World, has two hemispheres: one superior and visible, which is the past, the other inferior and invisible, which is the future. In the middle of both hemispheres are the horizons of time, which are these instants of the present that we live, where the past ends and the future begins. From this point, our History takes its beginning, which will discover the new regions and the new inhabitants from the second hemisphere of time, which are the antipodes of the past. Oh, what great and rare things there will be to see in this new discovery!” (emphasis added). See António Vieira, História do futuro, in Obras escolhidas. Lisboa: Livraria Sá da Costa, 1953, 12 vols., vol. VIII (I), 7.


To the best of my knowledge, Reinhart Koselleck rarely or never used in his works what I have described as the “vertical sense” of the term horizon, despite what one might expect of a theorist who elaborated two such efficient metaphorical tools as Erwartungshorizont and Zeitschichten, which could easily intersect with and complement one another via a stratification of horizons.


Droysen, for example, in his essay Zur Charakteristik der europäischen Krise (1854) compared the crisis of his time, which he considered one of those great historical crises “that lead from one world epoch to a new one” with that suffered by Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century, “with which America entered the horizon of history.” See Johann Gustav Droysen, “Zur Charakteristik der europäischen Krise” [1854], in Politische Schriften. Munich: Oldenbourg, 1933, 307–342, here 328. Note the ambiguous, spatio-temporal use the German historian makes of the word horizon here.

See Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life [1874], translated from German by Peter Preuss. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980, 9.