

Can Conceptual History Help us Develop Green Political Languages? The case of future generations.

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Problem and theoretical elements

How can green values such as long-termism be forwarded in politics? In a society of increasing human interference with the planets fundamental processes, the impact of the present on future people and their conditions of life increase. Climate change is a case in point, as political decisions made today on the issue will possibly have consequences for thousands of years to come. Green values such as long-termism are often conceived of and evoked as contrary to other political values, like democratic legitimacy or justice.¹ In this paper, perspectives from conceptual history are proposed as an approach to this problem. As an example, I use the concept of future generations in discussions on forest policy in France in the 1840s. First however, two basic questions are addressed.

Do concepts matter?

A view widely held in the study of political concepts is that "what it is possible to do in politics is generally limited by what it is possible to legitimise".² This seemingly simple perspective has proven to constitute a useful analytical tool, as it directs our attention to the values and terms circumscribing a particular political discourse. It further connects political possibility to certain concepts. Political concepts together form a language that functions as a framework of possibilities for politics in a given situation, which means that political concepts are a powerful resource in politics.³

Another basic idea in the study of concepts' histories is that the meaning of a political concept is always struggled over by different actors. Contradictory uses of political concepts often mirror profound conflicts over resources, rights or underlying categories.⁴ Consequently, conceptual historical inquiry doesn't have to be restrained to "great texts". The everyday of political life, parliamentary debates, propositions, journal articles, can also be sources for conceptual inquiry. Even a polemic text written for a specific debate, as in this case, can be treated with serious attention to the use of concepts.

Does history matter?

Why is it important for our understanding of the ecological crises we are in that we inquire into their history? French environmental historians like Jean-Baptiste Fressoz and Fabien Locher have criticized a prevailing idea that we are currently living in a process of ecological awakening that started in the 1960s. This idea includes a narrative of an environmentally oblivious past, in which environmental destruction was regarded as unproblematic and went unchallenged and unresisted. On the contrary, Fressoz and Locher argue, the technologies, practices and decisions that caused environmental destruction were never uncontested.⁵ However, by sticking to the narrative of a recent awakening, we remain ignorant about these contestations, about the environmental reflexivities of the past, and our understanding of the trajectories that have led us to the current situation is depoliticized. Such an understanding of the past in turn plays down the need for political contestation and environmental reflexivity today.

To engage with the history of our environmental crises contributes to a more political understanding of this history, less as an inevitable course of development, more as the result of certain decisions, of roads taken – and roads not taken. If we take into account the conceptual historical view that political concepts are an integral part of politics, our engagement with history should also include the history of political

1 See for example the discussion on how representation of future generations clash with democracy and justice in Ludvig Beckman, "Democracy and Future Generations: Should the Unborn have a Voice?" in J.-C. Merle (ed.), *Spheres of Global Justice: Volume 2, Fair Distribution*, Springer, 2013, 775–788.

2 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 105.

3 Quentin Skinner, "Language and political change" in Terence Ball, James Farr & Russell L. Hanson (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge University Press, 1989; Reinhart Koselleck, "Introduction to the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe", *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 6:1, 2011.

4 Skinner, 1989.

5 Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L'Apocalypse joyeuse: Une histoire du risque technologique*, Édition du Seuil, 2012, 12–13; Fabien Locher & Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "Modernity's Frail Climate: A Climate History of Environmental Reflexivity", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012, pp. 579-598, pp. 580–581.

concepts.⁶ How political writers and actors tried to include green considerations in their use of political languages is then an important part of our environmental history.

Forest politics in early 19th century France

If it is true that political concepts' meaning lie in their use, this means that they have to be studied in a particular historical context. This paper therefore takes as an example a snap shot of how the concept of future generations was used in discussions on forest policy in France in the 1840s.

Starting in 1789, the first half of the 19th century saw dramatic changes in the relationship between the state and the forest in France. These changes were so profound that they have been qualified as a shift in basic notions of nature and its relation to society. The 1827 *Code forestier* was an important stage in this development, as it strengthened private property rights at the cost of peasants' use rights.⁷ Historians have shown how spectacular acts of protestation and resistance followed in many parts of France.⁸

In the latter half of the 19th century, top-down grand scale forest projects were carried out in France as the state started several reforestation projects. New forests, by historians sometimes called industrial, were planted.⁹ The reforestation project was preceded by an active campaign, in which scholars, politicians and political writers warned against the dangers of deforestation and pleaded for the various benefits of reforestation, especially in the mountains.¹⁰

The point here is not to pose the question as to what made this grand scale project possible, or whether it was actually environmentally and socially beneficial. This paper instead takes one early example from the discussions on reforestation, to inquire into how the concept of future generations was used in order to argue against the selling of state forests and the issuing of permissions for clearing.

Joseph Humbert's use of future generations

Joseph Humbert (1799–1819), a vicar in Haussonville and later in Thiaucourt, is here suggested as an illustration of the use of future generations as a political concept. Humbert wrote pamphlets and petitions on matters of forest policy, and published articles in the forestry press. He was far from the only person in this debate to point to future generations in his arguments for reforestation. On the contrary, making such references was a frequent trope in discussions on forest policy at this time. Debaters putting forward different and contradictory propositions used it, often in vague way, to underline the general merit of their views. What made Humbert stand out was his rather precise integration of the long-term into his political arguments, and the way he used the concept of future generations to do that.

Humbert used the concept of future generations and a notion of the long-term to make arguments of several kinds, and his uses of the concept implied meanings other than the prevailing ones. He maintained a general view that cutting down forests meant depriving future generations of resources. Reforestation was thus a form of pre-emptive restitution of something that rightly belonged to them.¹¹ Humbert made the anthropological point that the shortness of human life was the very reason for our inability to calculate even our own and our family's best interest properly. This was especially pertinent in the case of forests.¹²

An often-evoked view in the forest debate was that free markets dynamics would satisfactorily guarantee the timber supply necessary for the state's needs. Humbert challenged this view with reference to the long-term, stating that free market dynamics were benign only in a short-term perspective.¹³ He also made the institutional point that political power is necessary since people are willing to make sacrifices for the common good, and for

⁶ For a historical inquiry into the political and conceptual conflicts around the German concept of sustainability, see Richard Hölzl, "Historicizing Sustainability: German Scientific Forestry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", *Science as Culture*, 19:4, 2010, pp. 431-460

⁷ Tamara L. White, *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France*, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 22; Bernard Kalaora & Antoine Savoye, *La Forêt pacifiée: Les forestiers de l'Ecole de Le Play, experts des sociétés pastorales*, L'Harmattan, 1986, p. 20.

⁸ See for example Peter Sahlin, *Forest Rites: The War of the Demoiselles in Nineteenth-Century France*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁹ Paul Arnould "Les forêts industrielles" in Andrée Corvol (ed.), *Les sources de l'histoire de l'environnement: le XIXe siècle*, L'Harmattan, 1999, pp. 3–9, p. 3

¹⁰ White, 2000.

¹¹ Humbert, *Quelques considérations sur les excès du déboisement et sur le projet de reboisement, reproduites en vue de la modification que doit subir la loi forestière, dans la session législative de 1847*, imprimerie de Vagner, 1847, pp. 21, 23.

¹² Joseph Humbert, "Observations de M. Humbert", *Le moniteur des eaux et forêts*, n° 7, 1842, pp. 319–323, p. 320.

¹³ Humbert, 1847, p. 28.

future generations, only in so far as they are assured that their fellow citizens will make the same sacrifices.¹⁴ Humbert further refuted the trope, commonplace since the revolution, that the rural popular classes were to blame for the destruction of the forests.¹⁵ Instead, he carefully placed the people on the side of forest protection for the benefit of future generations.¹⁶

The concept of future generations

As well as being a politically extremely turbulent period in France and several other European countries, the first half of the 19th century was crucial in the formation of modern political temporal horizons.¹⁷ The concept of generation was closely intertwined with this process. Starting at the end of the 18th century, political renewal was often conceptualized in generational terms.¹⁸ The trope of a revolt of the young against the old was inherent in the revolutionary political model: the revolution of 1789, and perhaps even more so that of 1830, were often understood in precisely that generational way. Radical writers and politicians celebrated the generational break as a force of political renewal and legitimacy.¹⁹ Conservative thinkers on the contrary underlined the strong connections between generations. The conflicting uses of the concept of generation are classically illustrated in the iconic disagreement between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke.

In the forest debate, intergenerational connections were often underlined, but not necessarily combined with unambiguously conservative political views. The political discussion on forests in France can thus be interpreted as an attempt to renegotiate the concept of generation beyond the schematic polarization between conservative entanglements between generations on the one hand and radical intergenerational detachment on the other. Humbert, and other writers engaging in the forest issue, described human generationality as a deficiency and a risk to be reckoned with politically.²⁰ Humbert explicitly discussed the finite character of human life as the very reason for individuals' inability to calculate even their own best interest properly. He also pointed to this inability as the reason for why free market competition failed to lead to a satisfactory organisation of production and distribution.²¹

In Humbert's texts, future generations were closely connected with notions of the *res publica*, of which forests were often used as a concrete example. None of these could successfully be managed by *laissez-faire* principles. Nor were they profoundly in conflict with the popular will.

Concluding remarks

Using the example of Joseph Humbert, I will conclude by pointing to three ways in which conceptual history can help us develop green political languages. First, studying historical uses of the concept of future generations can serve as a device to defamiliarize conceptual clusters in the political language of our own time.²² This can inform a contemporary questioning of the particular conceptual constellations in prevailing political language.

Second, as an historical example of environmental reflexivity, Humbert's texts invite us to seriously consider the actual uses of political concepts put forward. Most interesting among them, arguably, is Humbert's use of the concept of future generations to integrate a long-term perspective in his political arguments, and to let this perspective inform his views on economic dynamics, the state and popular will.

Third, reading Humbert's texts with attention to his use of political concepts also brings to light the way in which he himself contested received conceptual constellations, and tried to push the prevalent meaning of certain concepts. Humbert's uses of future generations thus demonstrate how the meaning of a concept can be altered, such as the conflict between future generations and the people, or the connection between political renewal and intergenerational independence. This, in turn, can inform and inspire new attempts to push political concepts in a greener direction.

14 Humbert, "Quelques réflexions sur l'aliénation des forêts de l'Etat", *Annales forestières*, 1849, pp. 25–33, p. 30.

15 Whited, p. 25.

16 Humbert, 1847, p. 10.

17 Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Suhrkamp, 1979.

18 Ohad Parnes, Ulrike Vedder & Stefan Willer, *Das Konzept der Generation: Eine Wissenschafts- und Kulturgeschichte*, Suhrkamp, 2008, p. 82.

19 Pierre Nora, "La génération" in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les lieux de mémoire*, T.3, Gallimard, 1992, pp. 931–971, p. 940–43; Sahlins, 1994, p. 119.

20 See for example Kalora and Savoye on the sociologist Le Play and his followers, Kalora & Savoye, 1986.

21 Humbert, 1842, p. 320.

22 For a further discussion on these issues, see Kari Palonen, "The History of Concepts as a Style of Political Theorizing: Quentin Skinner's and Reinhart Koselleck's Subversion of Normative Political Theory", *European Journal of Political Theory*, 1, 2002, p. 91.