Modern Intellectual History (2026), **23**, 892–903
doi:10.1017/S1479244325100255

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

REVIEW ESSAY

Bringing Intellectual History into Dry Dock

Nayeli L. Riano

Department of Government, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA
Email: nlr46@georgetown.edu

Javier Fernández-Sebastián, *Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2024)

Elías Palti, *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024)

The writing and practice of intellectual history are often reserved for the preliminary stages of academic inquiry within the field, condensed into one or two courses. Frequently regarded as a historical artifact, it serves as a foundational canon for students and scholars to study and align with a "school." Rarely is intellectual history approached as an ongoing and reflexive endeavor, as dynamic and mutable as the subjects it seeks to interrogate. There are disagreements between schools over the methods of intellectual history, to be sure, yet it is not the case that these different methods come down to a matter of preference, akin to choosing coffee over tea. These differences run deeper, rooted in epistemic shifts that have shaped the field over time. To speak of foundations in intellectual history is inappropriate from this perspective, for its changing landscapes would suggest a field whose assumptions are constantly in flux and occasionally brought to points of inflection from which new methods can form. To grasp the stakes of intellectual history and clarify its current state, scholars must constantly reexamine the questions that have shaped it over the years, thereby historicizing the field itself.

Epistemic shifts inevitably entail conceptual shifts—mediated, in turn, through language. Identifying changes in knowledge, such as the advent of novel theoretical frameworks, therefore cannot rely exclusively on the historian's ability to detect new or similar *ideas* across time and space. This approach would better describe the history of ideas. A greater awareness of the temporal contingencies of thought—its embeddedness in particular languages and contexts—has redirected the discipline's focus away from "ideas" and towards the concepts and languages that carry them within specific historical moments. This perspective has been advanced, albeit to varying degrees, by intellectual historians such as Reinhart Koselleck, Quentin Skinner, Hans Blumenberg, Hayden White, and Michel Foucault, to name a select few. Apart from their specialized

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244325100255 Published online by Cambridge University Press

research areas, their diverse investigations into the "history" of the history of ideas and critical interrogations of its guiding methodological premises have shaped the trajectory of the field by reimagining its foundational premises. Still, if all thought remains situated within a particular time and place, the influential contributions of these historians would also reflect the intellectual priorities and epistemic frameworks of their time. What, then—to use José Ortega y Gasset's apt phrasing—is "the theme of our time" regarding history?[1] And how might the writing and practice of intellectual history offer us a glimpse into the epistemic scaffolding of this, our contemporary theme?

In their recent books, Elías Palti and Javier Fernández-Sebastián concur that intellectual history is undergoing a transformative period, facing an uncertain future with respect to this difficulty of identifying our contemporary historical paradigm and its underlying epistemic assumptions. Navigating intellectual history's methodological pluralism vis-à-vis this elusive theme presents a formidable challenge, one that Palti and Fernández-Sebastián address with profound erudition, particularly through their acute exposition of the field's temporal contingency. Indeed, a significant overlap between Palti's *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* and Fernández-Sebastián's *Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* is their shared emphasis on history's own temporality, which underscores the temporal nature of intellectual history and its objects of study, whether ideas, concepts, or languages. The books each delve into one of two primary topics: Palti examines the epistemological challenges of conceptual change within intellectual history, while Fernández-Sebastián investigates the evolving metaphors pertaining to history and time that have shaped—and continue to shape—our understanding of historical temporality.

These books contribute to a renewed dialogue on disciplinary introspection, offering critical perspectives on the evolving methodologies that have defined intellectual history. They join recent publications on the methods of intellectual history by Darrin McMahon and Samuel Moyn (*Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (2014)), Richard Whatmore and Brian Young (*A Companion to Intellectual History* (2015)) and Martin Jay (*Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History* (2021)). Additionally, they consider the conceptual frameworks shaping the meaning, representation, and interpretation of history, complementing the scholarship of F. R. Ankersmit (*Historical Representation* (2001), *Sublime Historical Experience* (2005)), Melvin Richter and Martin Burke (*Why Concepts Matter: Translating Social and Political Thought* (2012)), and Richard Bellamy and Andrew Mason (*Political Concepts* (2003)). Furthermore, Palti and Fernández-Sebastián extend these discussions by addressing the philosophical and literary dimensions of historical writing and metaphor, adding to the work of Ivan Jablonka (*History Is a Contemporary Literature* (2014)), Ethan Kleinberg (*Haunting History* (2017)), and Matthieu Queloz (*The Practical Origins of Ideas* (2021)). By situating their analyses within these broader intellectual currents, Palti and Fernández-Sebastián not only

[1]José Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923), translated as *The Modern Theme* (New York, 1961).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244325100255 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enrich the field's discourse on methodology but also illuminate the evolving interplay between temporality, conceptual change, and historiographical practice.

Palti and Fernández-Sebastián are well acquainted with these dialogues. Their extensive contributions to intellectual history have consistently set the stage for the synthesis achieved in these books. Palti's scholarship on the intellectual history and political thought of nineteenth-century Latin America has recently been supplemented by his theoretical reflections on the methodologies of the field, bringing Latin America's long-standing intellectual traditions to the forefront of these debates (*Misplaced Ideas? Political-Intellectual History in Latin America* (2024)). His genealogy of "the political" has also questioned the idea of transhistorical concepts (*An Archaeology of the Political* (2017)). Both works exemplify several of Palti's claims in *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* regarding the identification of epistemic shifts, the historical contingency of concepts, and the precedence of discursive political languages over ideas to understand the political thought of a particular thinker writing in a specific context. Fernández-Sebastián's expertise in the linked conceptual history of Latin America, Spain, and Portugal (*Historia conceptual en el Atlántico Ibérico: Lenguajes, tiempos, revoluciones* (2021)) integrates his earlier work as the director of the formidable political and social dictionaries of the Ibero-American world from 1750 to 1870, which provide a landmark exposition of conceptual history in this context (*Diccionario politico y social del mundo iberoamericano*, vols. 1 and 2 (2009–14)). Indeed, the broader efforts of Fernández-Sebastián's *Iberconceptos* project (with which Palti is also involved) to study key political concepts, languages, images, and metaphors in the Ibero-American world from a comparative and transnational perspective have meaningfully incorporated Atlantic and global historiographical conversations into existing debates regarding the centrality of political concepts within the Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte* tradition. *Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* deepens Fernández-Sebastián's theoretical contributions by exploring the metaphorical structures that shape our understandings and expressions of historical time.

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Although *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* and *Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* share considerable methodological overlap and express similar concerns central to intellectual history—a discussion reserved for the conclusion—their distinct focuses merit individual consideration. Palti's book, based on his Seeley Lectures at Cambridge, revisits the main currents of intellectual history by dedicating the first chapters to its central thinkers, including Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, Reinhart Koselleck, Hans Blumenberg, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Michel Foucault. Palti claims that in recent decades the field has shifted away from the transcendental truths and rigid ideological binaries typical of the history of ideas. Instead he groups these thinkers under what he calls the New Intellectual History (NIH)—"the most radical process up to that moment of the desubstantialization/deontologization/historicization of concepts" (247)—emphasizing their common interest in explaining conceptual change through shifts in political language that, in turn, reshape the concepts that frame our political imagination. Palti examines the theories and trajectories of the Cambridge school, the German school of conceptual history, and French politico-conceptual history to contend that these prominent theories possess

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internal epistemic contradictions that hinder their ability to provide a comprehensive explanation for conceptual change and its dynamics.

The main problem for Palti is that all of these theories account for conceptual change by (unwittingly) relapsing into a priori conditions—into some type of transcendental that ultimately undermines a theory's emphasis on the temporality of conceptual change. Instead, the move from ideas to language requires uncovering their fundamental historicity to refute the view that ideas possess anything "beyond" history, that they are not themselves subject to history. For this reason, Palti prefers "a history of political languages" to a history of ideas, which

> entails a problematizing view of political history at large, thus more effectively breaking with the teleological and ahistorical perspectives of the history of ideas. It does not seek to prescribe any solution to the problems of modern politics … but intends to disclose why all of the alleged solutions are constitutively precarious, fragile, founded on a series of contingent assumptions and ultimately inconsistent. (166)

Even though the schools that comprise the NIH aligned themselves with the study of political languages, Palti elucidates why their impactful theories have fallen short of their claims. His critique does not dismiss these schools, of course, but it reflects on the epistemic limits inherent in the field through a historical survey of its development. As Palti puts it, his intention is "to situate these historical–conceptual theories themselves within a historical–conceptual perspective" (6).

In this respect, *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* serves as a meta-history that underscores the temporality of political languages and the historicity of epistemic frameworks as essential for understanding conceptual change. Central to this meta-history is Palti's critique of ideological and conceptual essentialism, a tendency particularly evident in the history of ideas but also reproduced in the NIH, to challenge the reduction of intellectual history to a mere comparison or continuity between antinomies, such as republicanism versus liberalism, nature versus convention, or society versus the individual. While these concepts and their binaries frame much of historical and political thought, they also run the risk of masking meaningful differences in political languages. The complete separation of ideas from language, then, is essential for intellectual history. Confusing the two negatively affects historical research not only by generating the vague assumption that certain concepts are constant across time because they possess some internal ontology, but also, more to Palti's point, by obfuscating the true sources of conceptual change, which can be found in the underlying political languages that convey ideas. It is in these discursive shifts that conceptual change takes place and can be detected.

Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change exhibits a reflexive interrogation of the assumptions that have shaped the field over the past half-century and which have precluded the complete separation of ideas from languages. Palti shows that while this division has been vigorously defended in theory, even its staunchest advocates have struggled to uphold it in practice. The three schools that he engages, and which form the NIH, mark what he terms the "age of forms" at the end of the twentieth century, a moment when intellectual historians shifted from viewing

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concepts as integral entities evolving over time to treating them as temporally contingent structures marked by rupture. This age signaled a "bifurcation" between "forms" and "life"; that is, "between self-regulated systems and transcendental subjectivity" (111). The age of forms may have initiated the conceptual separation between ideas and languages within intellectual history, but it also left some theoretical gaps that gradually gave way to its destabilization. On this front, he expounds on the theories of Rosanvallon and Blumenberg, ending with Foucault's archaeology of knowledge as the most significant participant in the age of forms because "it is placed at that limit point where it started dissolving" (168).

Palti's theoretical analysis develops most forcefully in the final chapters, which concern themselves with this dissolution of the age of forms that opened the way for a new theory to explain conceptual change. Foucault plays a central role in this story, as the figure who "finally breaks the framework of the history of ideas" (205). In Palti's account of Foucault, the French philosopher's archaeology of knowledge effectively renounces "resorting to the appellation to a transcendental figure, an agent placed outside systems … at the price of leaving the issue unsolved, declaring it unexplainable" (193). Unlike the first eight chapters, which critically examine the theories of major intellectual historians, the final chapters turn to Foucault and his famous decentering of the "subject" (i.e. man) in history to describe how his archaeology of knowledge illuminates "the nature of the conceptual transformations that took place at the end of the nineteenth century" and contributed to their eventual dissolution, but also to "the specific conceptual ground out of which these previously analyzed theories emerged" (194). Within this account, he proposes, exists an "ignored epistemic mutation" (195).

This epistemic mutation introduced a "new paradigm of temporality" as the "constitutive dimension" of systems (214). To uncover this dimension, Palti invokes the recurring image of "folding" systems onto themselves to reveal "inherent fissures … opening them up to historicity" (214). The result of such an analysis is the "event," exemplified in the final chapter through the parallel breakthroughs in thermodynamics that revealed the "radical indeterminacy in the functioning of systems," which, in seeking internal balance, produce "new orders of consistencies, unpredictable in their initial state" (219–20). Events, singular and unstable, reconfigure conceptual systems without clear origins (220–22). Though lacking causal explanation, they reshape horizons when they erupt. These scientific discoveries elucidate Foucault's idea of "the nondeterministic dynamics of the discursive formations" that indicate "the presence of thresholds of temporality in intellectual history" and introduce "a more radical sense of discontinuity in conceptual processes" (220–21). This indeterminacy exposes the limitations of earlier NIH frameworks, which attempted to render irrational, ontologically void events intelligible through external referents (e.g. Skinner's "author" or Koselleck's "social history"). For Palti, events defy definition and closure; they "can only be retrospectively recognized … by the kind of dislocation of existing horizons" that they provoke, along with "new—hitherto unpredictable—possibilities" (223). Ultimately, for Palti, the "event" displaces the "subject" as the driver of conceptual change, redirecting intellectual history towards contingency, disruption, and transformation rather than stable, unified origins.

These observations are deeply thought-provoking not only for intellectual historians but also for scholars interested in philosophies of history, epistemic shifts, and

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their possible connection to scientific discovery, as famously explored by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). In the realm of intellectual history, however, Palti concludes his book by describing what a shift from a "history of ideas to a history of languages" (235) might entail, raising stimulating questions about methodological eclecticism that gesture toward, but do not explicitly describe, a possible break from the methodological frames of reference within Cambridge contextualism, French structuralism/post-structuralism, or German conceptual history. Such innovation, however, must be balanced with the aims of intellectual history. While the field's broad scope encourages disciplinary pluralism—a welcome development—Palti warns that applying this pluralism to method can be counterproductive. He argues that interdisciplinary expertise under a shared aim unifies inquiry, whereas mere methodological eclecticism has a "disaggregating effect" (237), one that "blocks this oscillation [between theory and history] by inhibiting theoretical debates" (237). Instead, Palti urges historians to reconstruct the generative structures of political languages, "how discourses were produced, the means of their configuration, and how they changed over time" (238). His final claim to this point is provocative: intellectual history may be a misnomer for the field. The study of political languages runs against the very premises of ideas. His approach involves a "radical reversal" (239) of traditional methods as it seeks to identify "thresholds of historicity that render any prospective or retrospective projection unfeasible" (240), thus calling into question the possibility of conceptual continuity across time.

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In a sense, Fernández-Sebastián's book embodies the methodology for which Palti advocates. *Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time* probes the complexity of language itself to elaborate on its reliance on metaphors for conveying meaning, particularly as regards our conceptions of history. Fernández-Sebastián brings the insights of his work in Ibero-American conceptual history to consider how metaphors "lay the foundations of the logical thought upon which are built the strictest and most rigorous notions" (7). Given the vast array of metaphors that proliferate in our lives, he limits his study to those pertaining to historical time, including the passages between past, present, and future, to produce a "self-reflexive history that takes the historicity of history seriously" (280). Drawing on the work of Blumenberg, Koselleck, and Ricoeur, among numerous others, Fernández-Sebastián suggests that the use of metaphors for history is a way to understand the conceptual changes in our approaches towards history. Metaphors and concepts, after all, are often "barely distinguishable" (3). Metaphors, moreover, are a feature of language that indicates our discursive contexts and how these contexts shape our thinking at a preconceptual level. For this reason, Fernández-Sebastián insists on the importance of metaphors for any cognitive process since they shape the organization of knowledge. Metaphors are neither ornamental features in historical writing nor literary devices in rhetoric: they are a source of conceptual knowledge and a recurring feature of human thought.

Key Metaphors for History: Mirrors of Time is also a meta-history, albeit in a different mode than Palti's work. While Palti discusses the theories of conceptual change within schools of intellectual history to elaborate on their epistemic conditions and foreground their limitations, Fernández-Sebastián focuses on metaphors as cognitive and

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historiographical tools of analysis. He explores the metaphorical bases of discourses about history, in which the conceptual pillars of historiography were "originally little more than fleeting poetical flashes" (259) that gradually crystallized into strong conceptual frameworks for the field. This is because metaphors have a stronger power than concepts to convey meaning. As Fernández-Sebastián notes, the generative power of metaphors comes out when we recognize the "radical insufficiency of concepts for linguistic comprehension of the realities in which we live" (6). It is for this reason that nearly all concepts have underlying metaphors, even those we use to discuss the effects of history. Take, for example, the difference between "influence" and "reception," which Fernández-Sebastián describes. The former derives from the Latin verb *fluere* (to flow), implying connection and implicitly describing time as a continuous development; the latter, instead, from *recipere* (to take back), possesses a more agential connotation as the "action of the consumer of texts" (263). Where Palti emphasizes the study of political languages, Fernández-Sebastián emphasizes the fields of metaphorology, philosophy of history, and conceptual history, which not only fit within political languages but also corroborate its significance because of the fluid boundary between metaphors and concepts. His fusion of conceptual history and metaphorology highlights their "cosmopolitan dimension" (276) and their "mutually enriching and complementary perspectives" (280).

This point is proven by the very structure of the book, categorizing—as the title implies—"key metaphors for history" into two parts: "conceptual metaphors for history," and "metaphorical concepts in historiography." This inversion conveys the two effects of metaphors in history: how metaphors frame our understanding of history and its effects as a phenomenon, on the one hand, and how historians use metaphors to make sense of history in their own writing, on the other. The first touches on the cognitive and cultural dimensions that make it so that we conceive of history as, for example, a mirror, teacher, cycle, line, foreign country, or river (these are only a few of the metaphors explored in Part I). The second, instead, focuses on concepts used by historians, which possess metaphors in themselves, that help to analyze history, such as revolution, crisis, modernity, and progress (again, only a few of the terms analyzed in Part II). The result is a book that offers a vivid survey of some of the most lingering images that have become metaphors to express temporality and how these metaphors have given way to conceptual formation and vice versa, since "between the metaphorical and the conceptual there is a constant two-way flow" (260).

In his historical survey, Fernández-Sebastián argues that metaphorical changes often signal conceptual and epistemic shifts, which manifest not only in language but also in visual arts (*Key Metaphors for History* features engaging illustrations of prominent metaphors). Even motifs in music, to take another example, evoke earlier parts of a piece. Temporality, in other words, is embedded in nearly all disciplines, and shifts in metaphors, which are shifts in language, reflect these evolving accounts of time. Fernández-Sebastián discusses how metaphors like "turbulence" or "rupture" have signified a Western conceptual shift towards history where society is less future-oriented, leading to a "violent shaking" of the metaphors once used to understand time (77). He thus places a similar emphasis on discursive change to understand

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conceptual change, and this approach resists the discipline's proclivity for presentism that both Fernández-Sebastián and Palti consider problematic. The focus on metaphor can only strengthen the case for the study of political languages: discourses often employ metaphorical language (implicitly or explicitly) to convey meaning; paying closer attention to these mechanisms, therefore, can help to make sense of political languages. This is because fundamental metaphors, "which characteristically emerge as non-concepts" (260), have an epistemological function that facilitates the leap from the un-conceptual to the conceptual and possess a generative power that engenders new translational meanings over time. But even Fernández-Sebastián admits that the concepts that develop out of metaphors "often emerge from the imagination of a keen observer" (260)—gesturing at a possible tension with Palti's rejection of such an omniscient author.

Key Metaphors for History examines the symbolic, narrative dimensions of the historical imagination by encouraging readers to view metaphors as the underlying structure of historical meaning, bridging the semantic and the poetic in their epistemic origins. Fernández-Sebastián concludes his exploration of metaphors for history by reflecting on conceptual change, where "intellectual history tells us that such changes are related to the obsolescence and reinvention of the major interpretative frameworks of social worlds," which occur "sporadically, sometimes unpredictably" (262). While complete conceptual change is challenging to explain, "certain metaphors, like certain fundamental concepts," can "activate and record historical-cultural changes: they are at the same time indicators and factors of these changes" (262). Fernández-Sebastián also extends the disciplinary implications of his work to address the disparity between "the level of complexity achieved by the best-informed theory of history and the crudeness of a considerable part of the most widely circulated historical literature" (266). He emphasizes the imperative of preserving history as a methodologically rigorous discipline, cautioning against popularizing efforts to make history more applicable to the present. Yet the difficulty of achieving this, and the resistance it faces today, are, for him, "one of the most eloquent symptoms that we are currently undergoing a critical phase of profound transformation of historical consciousness" (268).

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The parallels between both works are plenty. Palti and Fernández-Sebastián converge in their emphasis on language to better understand concepts. They are concerned with the phenomenon of conceptual change and make interdisciplinary connections to understand it, especially with the natural sciences. Each author offers a meta-history—a reflective narrative that mirrors Shakespeare's metatheatre in the Mousetrap scene of *Hamlet*. Just as the play-within-a-play uncovers Claudius's guilt by exposing the mechanics of theatre, their meta-historical method exposes the hidden assumptions and preconceptions underpinning historical scholarship and historiography. By laying bare the anatomy of intellectual history, they prompt scholars to examine their own methods, recognize embedded epistemic assumptions, and acknowledge the temporal contingency of historical narratives. In this way, they illuminate the gaps in our theories and languages and invite ongoing self-reflection in the field.

Several of Palti and Fernández-Sebastián's points have been echoed by prominent literary theorists whose work on the role of language in shaping narratives can also

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benefit the practice of intellectual history. Jean Starobinski and Hayden White, whom Fernández-Sebastián occasionally cites, might prove central in this respect. They advocated for similar methodological shifts and paid close attention to metaphorology. Starobinski's literary criticism insists that thought (ideas) and language (discourse) are inseparable from their temporal conditions. For him, the act of recovering a figure's thought must first uncover the linguistic resources available to that thinker at that moment. In *Action and Reaction* (1999), Starobinski suggests that temporality functions as the very medium through which ideas are formed, not as a mere backdrop. History becomes discourse once we acknowledge that the "history of words speaks of the action and reaction between thought and speech" and that the dialectical interplay of language and concepts can fracture their networks into new semantic offshoots.[2] In his framework, conceptual change is also a generative process. Concepts are not containers of transcendent or immutable meaning, but rather evolve in texts by either splitting, fusing, or reconfiguring over time.[3] These linguistic shifts—which reflect cultural and conceptual transformations that eventually settle into the structures of our political thought—point towards what Starobinski calls "historical semantics," the investigation of deep historical structures of human knowledge and the conflicts that emerge from vocabulary's semantic variations, each signaling a different state of existence.[4]

Hayden White made a connected argument to support the shift from ideas to language for the field of history. His landmark *Metahistory* (1976) argues that history is a "verbal structure," a narrative form that renders historical writing a literary artifact. Its meaning-making function emerges through a "poetic act" wherein historians shape facts into genres—satire, comedy, romance, or tragedy—through what White calls "emplotment," guided by four master tropes: metonymy, synecdoche, irony, and metaphor.[5] Both White and Starobinski underscore the imaginative (indeed, poetic) dimension of historical thinking that shapes the political character of speech acts. Crucially for them, narrative form *precedes* authorial intervention because historians instinctively select genres that shape how they express their facts. This stylistic framing helps constitute the very context in which meaning arises, yet it is an emphasis notably absent in Foucault. His disregard for narrative signals a theoretical rift that problematizes his use as a guiding figure for historiographies concerned with conceptual transformation.

White recognized that Foucault's focus on language in *Les mots et les choses* (1966) effectively dismantled the humanist subject of the Renaissance (i.e. man). While Foucault was right to expose terms like "man" as metaphorical constructs mistaken for real entities, his effort to purge language of narrative structures—such as metaphor—went too far. As White observed, *Les mots et les choses* "thus appears to

[2]Jean Starobinski and Sophie Hawkes (trans.), *Action and Reaction: The Life and Adventures of a Couple* (1999) (New York, 2003), 9.

[3]See also Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty: 1700–1789* (Geneva, 1964).

[4]See Jean Starobinski's essay, "The Idea of Nostalgia," *Diogenes* 14/54 (1966), 81–103.

[5]Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 2–8.

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have a theme but no plot."[6] Foucault's synchronic method, ironically framed by the metaphor of archaeology, stands at odds with the diachronic, genre-sensitive approach to intellectual history developed by White and Starobinski. By focusing on structural discontinuities and epistemic formations at specific historical moments, Foucault's archaeological approach tends to elide the poetic and rhetorical dimensions that contribute to the diachronic texture of historical narrative (and Blumenberg astutely observed that Foucault employed the very tropological mechanisms his method sought to uncover[7]). Another potential problem with relying too much on Foucauldian archaeologies is the implicit assumption, evident in several of Foucault's works, that historical discourses which historians are meant to deconstruct are inherently flawed or misleading. Language, in this view, is not merely representational but potentially pernicious. This assertion was, of course, initially raised by Nietzsche to corroborate his genealogical approach, since, for him, truth is a hardened metaphor, long disassociated from its figurative origins.[8]

White's tropological approach to intellectual history, instead, foregrounds metaphor because of its epistemic significance, even necessity. He accepts the naturalness of tropology, arguing (and it seems Fernández-Sebastián would agree) that a metaphor-free archaeology of knowledge is untenable. Historians must reckon with the figurative foundations of thought by making underlying metaphors explicit, revealing how plot structures enable critique and help trace conceptual shifts. White, Starobinski, and Foucault need not be seen as incompatible, to be sure. As White wrote of *Les mots et les choses*, its diagnosis of the human sciences' failure "to recognize the extent to which they are each captive of language itself … to see language as a problem" is "correct and illuminating."[9] Yet White's model adds that the analogical images that structure knowledge, emerging through metaphors, must be accounted for to understand how epistemes change over time. This framework incorporates Foucauldian archaeology but insists that metaphor and narrative are inescapable dimensions of meaning-making.

Any given discipline represents a commitment to a form of representation that is often structured around some form of narrative and tropology. As White observes, "all systems of knowledge begin, in short, in a metaphorical characterization of something presumed to be unknown in terms of something presumed to be known, or

[6]Hayden White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," *History and Theory* 12/1 (1973), 23–54, at 28. White describes "representation" as the theme.

[7]Cf. Jean-Claude Monod, "Archives, Thresholds, Discontinuities: Blumenberg and Foucault on Historical Substantialism and the Phenomenology of History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 80/1 (2019), 133–46.

[8]Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Nonmoral Sense" (1837), in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* (Cambridge, 1999), 139–53; 146. Nietzsche writes, "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins."

[9]White, "Foucault Decoded," 45.

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at least familiar."[10] A strictly Foucauldian lens, privileging epistemic rupture over narrative, risks excising the very figurative scaffolding that makes historical thought coherent and that helps it to make connections across time and periods. This raises the critical question: can intellectual history still be called "history" if it abandons the very structures—such as narrative and metaphor—that give it shape? While the history-of-ideas framework proves insufficient for grasping conceptual change, it need not default to pure discontinuity and rupture. White offers a compelling alternative: epistemic frameworks transform through tropological shifts operating below explicit theory, reshaping how questions, categories, and connections become possible. Such a focus on narrative and discourse may also enable a more expansive engagement with the global heterogeneity of conceptual formation and its transformations. While Palti and Fernández-Sebastián do not address this global dimension directly, extending their theoretical frameworks in these two recent volumes to their established scholarship on the Ibero-American world helps to envision the conditions for a transregional intellectual history that repositions methodological vocabularies beyond the dominant paradigms of European theorizing. Even within a history of languages, the retention of narrative structures remains indispensable to the coherence and communicability of intellectual history.

Because the constitutive role of metaphor and narrative in shaping human thought cannot be circumvented, it is no surprise, then, that Palti and Fernández-Sebastián close their books with a metaphor that encapsulates their understanding of our discipline's contemporary theme. *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* features an epilogue—or, more aptly, a coda—that takes form as a nautical metaphor: the ship of intellectual history adrift at sea, where the sea itself is "a metaphor of language" (265). This metaphorical ocean, vast and mutable, carries "the ever-present threat of shipwreck" (255) as sailors (historians) venture from the familiar terrain of inherited certainties to create or discover new systems of knowledge out in uncharted waters. Yet this sea, as any force of nature, poses risk: it is the epistemic environment in which we currently navigate, "feeble, unstable, fluid" (265), but one that also represents the "rupture of unity" (261) from previous centuries. Herein lies the dilemma of how to rebuild this ship in the middle of such epistemic vastness and disquiet. As Palti reflects, "we can perhaps repair the ship's damage caused by the ravages of tides and storm, but it is impossible to create a new one with its remains" (261).

In a curious coincidence, *Key Metaphors for History* also casts its final metaphor as a ship out to sea. Fernández-Sebastián describes the epistemic crisis of our contemporary age as "a seascape in which one falls, fluctuates, and cannot hold on" (281). Our transition from having a conception of history and its epistemic assumptions as solid pillars to being an oceanic site of uncertainty makes it so that the ship of intellectual history "is threatening to sink" and "it remains to be seen whether this time it will be enough to replace a few planks or we will lose the whole ship, in which case a new one will have to be built" (281–2). Their shared metaphor, and shared doubt, motivate their ambitious projects. Both Fernández-Sebastián and Palti treat the discipline of intellectual history as a ship that they bring into (a *floating*) dry dock, seeking to repair its

[10]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244325100255 Published online by Cambridge University Press

foundation by providing a much-needed analysis and offering tools for its transformation. Through their rigorous meta-histories, they have not only removed and replaced old assumptions and frameworks in the discipline, but also structurally reinforced new core ideas within conceptual history. Although their closing metaphor invokes uncertainty, one is left feeling more optimistic about the future of the field after reading their books. With continued conversations over these vital questions, the field will emerge stronger, ready to navigate such unknown waters.

Cite this article: Nayeli L. Riano, "Bringing Intellectual History into Dry Dock," *Modern Intellectual History* **23** (2026), 892–903. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244325100255

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244325100255 Published online by Cambridge University Press