The Politics of Time

Zeitgeist in Early Nineteenth-Century Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the uses of *zeitgeist* in early nineteenth-century European political discourse. To explain the concept's explosive takeoff in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, two perspectives are combined. On the one hand, the concept is shown to be a key element in the new, "temporalized" discourses of cultural reflection emerging during this time. On the other, its pragmatic value as a linguistic tool in concrete political constellations is outlined on the basis of case studies from French, British, and German political discourse. Developing this two-sided perspective, the article sheds light on an important aspect of early nineteenth-century political discourse while also pointing to some general considerations concerning the relationship between the semantic and pragmatic analysis of historical language use.

KEYWORDS

Europe, nineteenth century, political discourse, pragmatics, semantics, *zeitgeist*

Considering the semantics of European political debates from the late eighteenth into the early nineteenth century, two characteristics stand out. First, whether they revolved around the general nature of politics or specific political issues, these debates were often pervaded by a spiritual vocabulary. Invocations of the national spirit, the spirits of freedom, justice, enlightenment, Christianity, and civilization went hand in hand with anxieties about the spirits of disorder, luxury, effeminacy, irreligion, and revolution. Alongside references to a myriad of particular spirits of *something*, generalized usages, like the "world spirit,"¹ whose historical progress stood at the center of Hegel's philosophy of history, were equally widespread.² From the viewpoint of

1. Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* [Elements of the philosophy of right] (Berlin: Nicolai, 1821), 343.

2. For an introduction to this semantic field, see Ludger Oeing-Hanhoff et al., "Geist," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* [Historical dictionary of philosophy], Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, eds., vol. 3 (Basel: Schwabe, 1974), 154–204; and the various contributions to Michael Gamper and Peter Schnyder, eds., *Kollektive*

this versatile semantic field, concrete political constellations, events, and developments appeared as resulting from (or rather, playing out) a higher-order struggle between opposing spiritual forces. In addition to this type of spiritual vocabulary, and often tied up with it, references to the course of history likewise abounded in these debates. From a contemporary perspective, history not only provided the decisive framework for political action, it was itself what was ultimately at stake in the political realm. Politics, then, was all about history, and accordingly, political actors habitually defined themselves (as well as their opponents) in terms of their relative position with respect to historical progress. Whether they thought of themselves as being backward, up-to-date, or part of a historical avant-garde, as advancing history's progress, forcing a break with its previous path, or returning it from a temporary aberration to its normal course, political actors could not easily escape the question of the historical significance of their actions.

A concept at the intersection between these two semantic fields, which consequently played a crucial role in contemporary political discourse, was the *spirit of the age* or *zeitgeist*. After a brief introduction into its early history and general properties, this article focuses on its use in political debates in France, England, and the German territories roughly from the French Revolution into the 1830s. Combining the methodological viewpoints of historical semantics and pragmatics, the concept's diverse meanings are linked to their rhetorical functions in the context of these debates. This double-sided perspective not only provides further insight into an important dimension of early nineteenth-century political discourse, but also points to some general considerations concerning the relation between the semantic and pragmatic analysis of historical language use.

The Concept of *Zeitgeist*: General Considerations and Early History

Since 2001, Google has published the yearly Google *Zeitgeist*. On the basis of a statistical analysis of its search queries, the company provides a number of interactive graphs depicting what people have been most interested in during the past year. In an explanatory note, the developers write how in their view, the *zeitgeist*—being “the general intellectual, moral, and cultural climate of an era”—becomes visible “through the aggregation of millions of search queries Google receives every day.”³

Gesperster: Die Masse, der Zeitgeist und andere unfassbare Körper [The crowd, the spirit of the age and other intangible bodies] (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2006); Claire Gantet and Fabrice d'Almeida, eds., *Gesperster und Politik: 16. bis 21. Jahrhundert* [Ghosts and politics: 16th to 21st century] (Munich: Fink, 2007).

3. <http://www.google.com/zeitgeist/>. Google's use of the German lexeme is noteworthy. Ac-

Well before this kind of data-mining capability became available, however, claims about the spirit of the age were already widespread. In contrast to Google's statistical diagnostics, which are ultimately quantitative in nature, earlier uses of the concept invariably implied qualitative claims about the character of the age, thus presupposing at least three general axioms. First, that the plurality of phenomena within a certain period is somehow held together by a fundamental unity (its spirit), which changes over time. Second, that this unity is revealed in a number of "signs of the times", while other phenomena are either secondary or irrelevant to the era's spiritual composition. And finally, that the one making the claim about the *zeitgeist* is somehow able to see beyond the surface of things and correctly identify and interpret the signs of the times with reference to the composition of the spirit of the age.

Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, the modern concept of *zeitgeist* was not "invented" in the mid-eighteenth century by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).⁴ In fact, first occurrences in Latin, English, and French may already be found in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At this time, the concept was primarily used as an analytic tool in narratives about the history of literature and of art. In this context, it provided an answer to the question why certain periods seem to abound in geniuses of all sorts while in others they are remarkably scarce.⁵ Already at this early stage, the concept was controversial. On the one hand, its use in historical analysis had to compete with a tradition of religious usage, in which the expression "spirit of the times" was contrasted with the "spirit of eternity", and the "signs of the times" were understood to indicate the imminent apocalypse.⁶ On the other hand, the concept

cording to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Zeitgeist" (capitalized and not capitalized) has been used in English since the mid-nineteenth century. It seems probable that Carlyle's early use (with accompanying translations as "Time-Spirit" or "Spirit of Time") played an important role in this transfer. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröck* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1831), 59; Thomas Carlyle, "[Review of] An Essay on the Origins and Prospects of Man ...," *Edinburgh Review* 54, no. 108 (1831): 377. To differentiate the concept from the German lexeme, the concept is not capitalized here.

4. Markus Meumann, "Der Zeitgeist vor dem Zeitgeist: *Genius saeculi* als historiographisches, mnemonisches und gegenwartsdiagnostisches Konzept im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert," in *Frühe Neue Zeiten: Zeitwissen zwischen Reformation und Revolution* [Early modern times: Time awareness between Reformation and revolution], Achim Landwehr, ed. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 283–318.

5. See, for example, Louis Le Roy, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers* [On the vicissitude or variety of things in the universe], 3rd ed. (Paris: De Pierre l'Huillier, 1579), 29, 116; John Barclay, *Icon Animorum* [The mirror of minds] (Frankfurt am Main: Aubry, 1625), 23; Francis Bacon, *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* [Of the advancement and proficiency of learning] (London: Haviland, 1623), 87–88.

6. Louis Bourdalouë, "Autre sermon sur l'annonciation de la vierge" [Second sermon on the Annunciation of the Virgin], in *Sermons*, vol. 2 (Anvers: Aux dépens de la Compagnie,

of *zeitgeist* itself was often criticized as overly vague and generalized, while its spooky connotations made it an easy target of satire.⁷

From the middle of the eighteenth century onward, instances in which the concept was used to designate the general character of a specific epoch gradually gained currency, before spreading rapidly against the background of the French Revolution. For a general impression of the pace of this development, we return briefly to Google. Using the data available from its digitalization project Google Books, the company has developed Google Ngrams, which tracks the relative use of (groups of) words within a specific language corpus. As the developers themselves point out, these results are by no means representative of language use in all contemporary publications.⁸ Problems of corpus selection, text recognition, and erroneous metadata preclude their use for rigorous lexicometrical analysis. The unsystematic nature of corpus selection is further complicated by the fact that its parameters are not equal for various parts of the corpus.⁹ The digitization of library collections, in which older books are often stored separately and subject to special scanning restrictions, may result in significant differences in corpus composition between earlier and later periods. Furthermore, the fidelity of text recognition is considerably lower for older texts printed in antiquated and often highly variable typeface. Although some common errors could be cross-checked (for example, *efprit du temps* for *esprit du temps*) in the course of this research and did not lead to differing results, any data on pre-nineteenth century materials or about long-term trends should be treated cautiously. Still, these graphs provide us with a rough idea of the long-term increases and decreases of usage of some of the major lexemes connected with the concept of *zeitgeist*.¹⁰

1713), 90–91; Jean Croiset, *Parallèle des mœurs de ce siècle et de la morale de Jésus-Christ* [Parallel between the manners of this age and of the morals of Jesus Christ], vol. 1 (Lyon: Boudet, 1727), 432–433.

7. See, with references to the relevant literature, Theo Jung, “Zeitgeist im langen 18. Jahrhundert: Dimensionen eines umstrittenen Begriffs” [Spirit of the age in the long 18th century: Dimensions of a controversial concept], in Landwehr, *Frühe Neue Zeiten*, 319–355.

8. Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” *Science* 331 (2011): 176–182.

9. Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books: Supporting Online Material,” *Science* 331 (2011), accessed 24 March 2014, <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/early/2010/12/15/science.1199644/suppl/DC1>, 16–17.

10. For a thorough consideration of the use of Google Ngrams in historical research, see the various contributions to James Schmidt, *Persistent Enlightenment*, <http://persistentenlightenment.wordpress.com>. See also Philipp Sarasin, “Sozialgeschichte vs. Foucault im Google Books Ngram Viewer: Ein alter Streitfall in einem neuen Tool” [Social history vs. Foucault in the Google Books Ngram viewer: An old controversy in a new tool], in *Wozu noch Sozialgeschichte? Eine Disziplin im Umbruch* [Why still social history? A discipline in

Graph 1. *Esprit du siècle, esprit du temps*, French language corpus, 1730–1900 (2-year-average smoothing, case-insensitive).

Source: Google Ngram Viewer (3 March 2014).¹¹

Tracing the most commonly used lexemes expressing the concept in the French language corpus (Graph 1), a clear picture emerges. After some early use in the second half of the eighteenth century, a takeoff occurs during the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic era. A steep rise during the Napoleonic Wars reaches its pinnacle in the early years of the Restoration. In the 1830s and 1840s, usage plateaus at a high level until the early 1860s, after which usage begins to decline. Overall, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 seem to have had only limited impact.

Graph 2. *Spirit of the age, spirit of the times*, British English language corpus, 1730–1900, (2-year-average smoothing, case-insensitive).

Source: Google Ngram Viewer (3 March 2014).

transition], Pascal Maeder, Barbara Lüthi, and Thomas Mergel, eds. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 151–174.

11. <http://books.google.com/ngrams/>. “2-year-average smoothing” means that the value for a specific year (for example, 1810) is averaged with the previous and subsequent two years (1808, 1809, 1811, 1812).

In the British English language corpus (Graph 2) the fact that between about 1810 and 1848 the lexeme *spirit of the times* was slowly but surely overtaken by the *spirit of the age* stands out. Although the general diffusion of the concept seems to have been gradual, there are some interesting spikes during the Seven Years' War, the buildup to the American Revolution, the Reign of Terror in France, and the early Napoleonic Wars. After 1830, the *spirit of the age* lexeme continued to rise until 1848, after which it decreased, first quickly, then more steadily.

Graph 3. *Zeitgeist*, *Geist des Zeitalters*, *Geist der Zeit*, German language corpus, 1730–1900 (2-year-average smoothing, case-insensitive).

Source: Google Ngram Viewer (3 March 2014).

The results in the German language corpus (Graph 3) show many similarities with the French and English cases.¹² After some early usage from the 1770s onward we note a rise during the French Revolution followed by a steep rise and then a peak during the Napoleonic Wars. After the establishment of Napoleonic rule over most of the German territories, a curious divergence between the various lexemes appears. The lexeme *Geist der Zeit* drops off markedly from 1809 onward, only shortly reestablishing itself during the Wars of Liberation before declining slowly. *Zeitgeist*, on the other hand, while showing a similar drop after 1809, quickly recovers and reaches a new peak in the early years of the Restoration. Although this lexeme too will decline slowly during the following century, in contrast to *Geist der Zeit* it shows marked recoveries during the 1830 and 1848 revolutions.

The question of censorship needs to be addressed in this context. The fact that these graphs depict relative usages of the lexemes connected to the con-

12. One conspicuous difference would merit further analysis. In comparing these images, it is essential to point out that their vertical scales are not identical. In the German corpus the use of *Zeitgeist* peaks at about 0.0008 percent of all words used, which is about five times higher than the respective peak years of *esprit du siècle* in the French and *spirit of the age* in the English corpus.

cept of *zeitgeist* means that they factor in fluctuations in the total number of publications. Still, the effects of censorship may show up whenever they result in changes in the concept's relative popularity. If the hypothesis that *zeitgeist* played a prominent role in political debates holds up, censors may well have perceived the concept as a marker for "undesired discourse", leading to its decreased use in the corpus. The German case may in fact present an example of this phenomenon. The intensified censorship after the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819 seems to show up in the data, putting an end to the concept's heavy use from the Wars of Liberation onward. A similar drop is visible in the French language corpus, which may be explained by the crackdown on the press following the assassination of the Duke of Berry in 1820. In contrast, the British corpus, where no new censorship laws were enacted at this time, shows a continuous increase. Still, such correlations need to be analyzed with care. Upon closer inspection, the 1819 drop in the German corpus only holds up for the lexeme *Zeitgeist*, whereas, as noted above, usage of the lexeme *Geist der Zeit* already begins to decline after 1809. Establishing why this is the case would merit a more detailed analysis than is possible in the context of the present argument.

Semantic and Pragmatic Dimensions

While caution is called for in view of the nature of the data presented in the Google Ngram graphs, some general observations may be made with a degree of confidence. For all their differences, the graphs show some notable commonalities. Although there is evidence of some earlier usage, this does not become quantitatively significant until the 1760s and 1770s. From this moment onward, there is a steady rise, resulting in a peak during the Napoleonic era and the early years of the Restoration. After this, usage either levels off or continues to rise in a more gradual fashion.¹³ After the middle of the nineteenth century, the concept is generally on the decline. Although it is by no means stricken from the vocabulary, its heyday seems to be over.

Explaining linguistic change is notoriously difficult. In the case of the common denominator of the graphs displayed above, the explosive diffusion

13. In some measure, this takeoff was observed by contemporaries themselves, who frequently commented upon the concept's proliferation. See, for example, Georg Friedrich von Cölln, "Ueber den Zeitgeist," *Neue Feuerbrände zum brennen und leuchten* [New fires for burning and illuminating] 6, no. 16 (1808): 96; [John Stuart Mill], "The Spirit of the Age," *The Examiner*, no. 1197 (9 January 1831): 20–21; [Carl Julius Weber], "Der Geist der Zeit," in *Dymocritos oder hinterlassene Papiere eines lachenden Philosophen* [Democritus, or papers left behind by a laughing philosopher], vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Brodhag 1833), 293. To a certain degree, such metalinguistic utterances provide corroboration for the developments traced in the Google Ngram graphs.

of the *zeitgeist* concept in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the combination of two ultimately interrelated types of explanation—one semantic, the other pragmatic—may lead us to a better understanding. From a semantic perspective, the concept's dissemination takes place against the background of a broad change in the general understanding of the world and man's place in it, a long-term semantic shift that has been famously characterized as a temporalization of cultural self-reflection.¹⁴ As a variety of authors, most notably Reinhart Koselleck, have pointed out, the beginning of the modern era may at least in part be understood in terms of the rise to dominance of a specifically modern sense of time: an understanding of past, present, and future involving a specific set of parameters that differ markedly from those dominant in other periods. Although it is not possible to go into this new temporal structure of experience in detail here, we may mention some of its major characteristics in passing. First, the modern subject is confronted with a growing divide between his or her previous experiences and future expectations, a phenomenon that has been characterized as the drifting apart of the "realm of experience" and the "horizon of expectations."¹⁵ Second, modern understanding of the self and its world is generally based upon the assumption that every individual event and development is part of one universal history progressing—for better or for worse—into the future. Third, modernity is marked by the sense that the pace of history is progressively accelerating. And finally, the shift from the premodern to the modern world involves the gradual decoupling of human civilization from the realm of providence, paving the way for ambivalent interpretations of history as man-made on the one hand and as an independent force and constraint on human action on the other.

Although both the nature and the precise chronology of this semantic shift in various contexts and nations are heavily disputed,¹⁶ it is clear that the

14. For an introduction to these debates, see Alexandre Escudier, "'Temporalisation' et modernité politique," *Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales* 64, no. 6 (2009): 1269–1301; Theo Jung, "Das Neue der Neuzeit ist ihre Zeit: Reinhart Kosellecks Theorie der Verzeitlichung und ihre Kritiker" [What's modern about the modern age is its time: Reinhart Koselleck's theory of temporalization and its critics], *Moderne: Kulturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* 6 (2010/2011): 172–184.

15. Reinhart Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont'—zwei historische Kategorien" ["Space of experience" and "horizon of expectation"—two historical categories], in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* [Futures past: On the semantics of historical time] (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 349–375.

16. Jörn Leonhard, "Erfahrungsgeschichten der Moderne: Von der komparativen Semantik zur Temporalisierung europäischer Sattelzeiten" [Histories of modern experience: From comparative semantics towards the temporalization of European saddle periods], in *Dimensionen der Moderne*, Ute Schneider and Lutz Raphael, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2008), 549–566; Stefan Jordan, "Die Sattelzeit: Transformation des Denkens oder revolutionärer Paradigmenwechsel?" [The saddle period: Transformation of thought or revolutionary paradigm shift?], in Landwehr, *Frühe Neue Zeiten*, 373–388.

French Revolution and its aftermath were crucial to its final breakthrough. Contemporaries—both in France and beyond—experienced the French Revolution as a sudden break with the past, heralding a new epoch.¹⁷ In its wake, a group of new, temporalized discourses revolving around concepts like progress, history, revolution, and civilization emerged, articulating a new understanding of modern man and his place in history. At the center of all this stood the concept of *zeitgeist*.

A second type of interpretation approaches this conceptual history from the viewpoint of pragmatics. It asks what the concept *did* in particular contexts and why it was used, that is, what made it an attractive linguistic tool to particular actors in specific contexts. The fact that the ups and downs of conceptual usage in the graphs above can often be correlated to political events suggests that one important dimension in this regard is the political. As the case studies presented below show, from 1789 until the late 1830s the concept provided an important reference point in European debates about specific political events and actors as well as in discussions about the possibility, desirability, or inevitability of social and political change. The analytic category of temporalization designates the general semantic shift in which this diffusion of the *zeitgeist* concept was embedded. Regarding individual speech acts using the concept, the category points to the semantic horizon of possibility of a specific type of language use. At the same time, it provides us with a retrospective description of the emergent qualities displayed by this discourse. It does not, however, answer the question why individual actors chose to use a particular concept rather than another as their linguistic tool in particular contexts. In general, historical actors do not use concepts *in order to* establish any specific discourse. Their emergence cannot adequately be explained in terms of success or failure, of direct results of goal-oriented action. Rather, they emerge as aggregate effects of a multitude of individual actions oriented toward a variety of context-specific—and often contrary—goals.

Consequently, the historical analysis of language use would profit from a more systematic combination of macro- and micro-level analysis. It needs to account for the fact that the phenomena we call “discourses” or “concepts” do not exist beyond or behind the myriad of individual speech acts they designate. Rather, as aggregate structures of repetition they are nothing more than that which is repetitive, and therefore recognizable, about a series of speech acts. As a result, to move beyond the level of description to that of explanation, it is imperative that we take the perspective of the actors into account. We need to return to the level of micro-analysis to understand individual lan-

17. Reinhart Koselleck and Rolf Reichardt, eds., *Die Französische Revolution als Bruch des gesellschaftlichen Bewußtseins* [The French Revolution as a rupture of social consciousness] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1988).

guage use as a choice between multiple possible linguistic strategies to achieve context-specific goals.

This “choice” is certainly rational, but not in the sense of an abstract *homo economicus* calculating the risks, costs, and benefits of all possible options before choosing the optimal course of action. As we have—in the wake of Austin and Searle—become used to interpreting language use as a “way to do things with words”, we should not lose sight of the fact that in an important sense, language is not an “instrument” at our disposal. “Our” words are our own only in the sense that they already surround us and as such define who we are and how we perceive the world. Thus, the individual actor’s choice of linguistic “tools” is itself constrained by his understanding of the situation, of his own communicative goals, and consequently of those options that present themselves as possible, viable, and meaningful.

This brings us back to the macro level. Individual speech acts—to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu¹⁸—are at the same time structured and structuring: they react to a semantic horizon that they are simultaneously (re)producing. A comprehensive history of concepts therefore needs to navigate between the micro and the macro perspective, moving back and forth while avoiding setting one or the other as an absolute. Regarding the concept of *zeitgeist*, this means that its remarkable diffusion in the early nineteenth century can be explained in terms of the interplay of temporalization on the one hand and actors’ rising expectations toward the concept’s pragmatic value on the other.

It is this type of double-edged approach that is developed here with regard to the concept’s political use.¹⁹ Presenting examples from a variety of political contexts, its spectrum of usage is analyzed not in terms of abstract polysemy, but of the multiplicity of rhetorical functions the concept could have to individuals and groups in specific constellations.²⁰ On this basis, a wide-ranging but limited cluster of uses is sketched, directly correlated to the central political fault lines of the day. Besides its sheer variety, which—it is argued below—was an important catalyst for its further dissemination, this approach also points to the ways in which the concept’s various usages related to one another.

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* [Outline of a theory of praxis] (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 256.

19. Although, in view of the limited space available, this article is restricted to *zeitgeist*’s political use, a similar approach may be fruitfully applied to other linguistic contexts in which the concept was used, resulting in a more complete picture of its manifold pragmatic value.

20. The examples presented, therefore, are not in any quantitative sense “representative” of the language use of any particular group or actor. Rather, they are chosen to be illustrative of particular rhetorical functions of *zeitgeist*. To further highlight the range and diffusion of the concept’s usage, where possible the choice of examples focuses on those that—although often influential at the time—are less known today.

Temporal Legitimacy

Throughout the Western world, the French Revolution was viewed as a major historical watershed. In its contemporary interpretation, two general tendencies may be distinguished: one actor-oriented and one referring to a variety of more abstract historical forces, which, as noted above, in contemporary discourse were often articulated in spiritual terms. In actor-oriented accounts, the events since 1789 were understood in terms of individual and collective actions and conflicts. The results of such interpretations could of course be very diverse, ranging from the triumphantly heroic to Barruel's theory of a worldwide Jacobin conspiracy.²¹ The questions framing this perspective, however, consistently focused on the actions, success, failure, and responsibility of concrete actors: What groups and individuals had "made" the revolution? For what reasons and to what purposes? By what means and under what circumstances?

At the same time, the establishment and diffusion of temporalized discourses since the second half of the eighteenth century made it possible to view the French Revolution in a different light. Within this alternative semantic framework, the focus on individual and collective actors and actions was replaced by a stress on the revolution itself as an epochal shift. Many of its contemporaries—both advocates and opponents—understood it as a result of the spreading and dominance of a "revolutionary spirit", a spiritual tendency not necessarily restricted to France but potentially contagious to other nations.²²

In this manner, history could be reimagined as a battlefield on which spiritual powers fought for dominance. The Scottish Presbyterian minister George Thomson, for example, in his lecture series on *The Spirit of General History* of 1792, identified more than thirty different spiritual forces, ranging from the malicious spirits of despotism, furious zeal, intolerance, superstition, party, and persecution to the more benign spirits of free inquiry, legislation, independence, and industry. In his eyes, these spirits had, either consecutively or in spiritual combat with one another, determined the character of various historical periods.²³ From a pragmatic viewpoint, two questions now arise: First, what tactical advantage could historical actors expect to have from the rhetorical use of this spiritual vocabulary, that is, what were its primary functions in political debates? And second, what linguistic counterstrategies were subsequently developed to confront these usages?

21. Augustin Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* [Memoirs illustrating the history of Jacobinism], 4 vols. (London: Le Boussonnier, 1797–1798).

22. See, for example, Heinrich Steffens, *Die gegenwärtige Zeit und wie sie geworden: Mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Deutschland* [The current age and how it emerged: With a special focus on Germany], vol. 1 (Berlin: Reimer, 1817), 498–500.

23. George Thomson, *The Spirit of General History, in a Series of Lectures*, 2nd ed. (London: Law et al., 1792).

Among the strategic functions the concept of *zeitgeist* could adopt, two main groups may be identified: arguments of temporal legitimacy and arguments from historical inevitability. In the first place, the concept could be used as a source of legitimacy. Certain phenomena or people could be presented as “in accordance with” the spirit of the age, giving them a nimbus of respectability and up-to-dateness. Which particular actors, institutions, and decisions exhibited this conformity to the *zeitgeist* was, of course, a matter of fierce debate. From the *Siècle de Louis le Grand* onward, panegyric formulas naming a time period after a key individual had become increasingly widespread. At first, the majority of these eponyms had been rulers, but in time the list came to include famous scientists, artists, authors, and other luminaries. Gradually, a more or less standardized canon of historical greats was formed, including (but not limited to) Socrates, Jesus, Caesar, Augustus, Mohammed, Charlemagne, Lorenzo de Medici, Luther, Newton, Louis XIV, Voltaire, and Frederick II.²⁴ From the late eighteenth century onward, the special status of these eponyms would often be articulated in terms of their relation to the spirit of the age. As geniuses or world-historical individuals, it was held, they not only had special knowledge of the *zeitgeist*, but were its primary agents, shaping the course of history. Conversely, the presupposed interdependence between these greats and the spirit of their age could be taken to imply that historians could determine the character of specific epochs by identifying its spiritual giants. Thus, as Joseph-Marie Portalis (1778–1858) argued in a prize-winning essay on historiography, the historian’s task was to assess the “action and reaction of the great men on their age and of their age on them.”²⁵

It is no surprise that in the early nineteenth century debates about this view of history focused primarily on Napoleon. The French emperor was habitually viewed as the personification and representative of the *zeitgeist*. In France as well as abroad, even his enemies considered him to be more than a mere man. The political publicist Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860), who played a major role in the German patriotic outcry during the Wars of Liberation and was at times himself considered to be a “spokesman of the *zeitgeist*,”²⁶ had to

24. Jochen Schlobach, “Du siècle de Louis au siècle de Frédéric?” [From the age of Louis to the age of Frederick?], in *Le siècle de Voltaire*, Christiane Mervaud, ed., vol. 2 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1987), 831–846; Claudia Schröder, “*Siècle de Frédéric II*” und “*Zeitalter der Aufklärung*”: *Epochenbegriffe im geschichtlichen Selbstverständnis der Aufklärung* [“Age of Frederick II” and “Age of Enlightenment”: Period concepts in Enlightenment historical self-reflection] (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002).

25. Joseph-Marie Portalis, *Du devoir de l'historien* [On the duty of the historian] (Paris: Bernard, 1800), 8–9. Following the same logic, William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Colburn, 1825), contained biographical sketches of eminent men. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

26. Karl Georg Neumann, *E. M. Arndt's Urtheil über Friedrich den Großen* [E. M. Arndt's opinion about Frederick the Great] (Berlin: Flittner, 1818), 20.

admit that “[i]n an obscure manner, Bonaparte carries within him the spirit of the age, making him seem all powerful. . . . When the age presents someone as great as that, its will is revealed.”²⁷

Unsurprisingly, the emperor himself was more than willing to use this spiritual aura to his political advantage. During the Hundred Days, in his preamble to the constitution of the renewed empire, he proclaimed that it had been the continual aim of his reign and his many conquests in the previous fifteen years to integrate Europe into a great federal system, “in accordance with the spirit of the times and favorable to the progress of civilization.”²⁸ Yet simultaneously, on the opposite side of the European power struggle, the same motif was used to contrary purposes. In an official declaration, the Congress of Vienna insisted that the “restoration of public law” instituted by the treaty between Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Saxony of 18 May 1815 “established a salutary accord between the spirit of the age and the perfection of such institutions as are apt to guarantee to every people the enjoyment of its honor and its liberty.”²⁹

Historical Inevitability

Along with the use of the concept of *zeitgeist* to legitimize specific persons, institutions, or actions, its most influential political use revolved around the implied connotation that change was inevitable. As one German author warned his contemporaries, the “reigning spirit of your age is brought about just as unavoidably by the succession of centuries, as are the seasons by the periodic revolutions of the sky.”³⁰ On the basis of this general premise, a variety of arguments were developed.

First of all, political errors could be retrospectively explained as a failure to adjust to the spirit of the age. Louis XVI especially was the object of much

27. Ernst Moritz Arndt, *Geist der Zeit*, 2nd ed. (s.l.: s.n., 1807), 428–430.

28. “Acte additionel aux constitutions de l’empire, Paris le 22 avril,” *Le Miroir Politique*, no. 118 (6 May 1815): n.p. In a manuscript left behind on Elba and published posthumously, he had written: “Among the nations which at present perform on the European stage, there is not a single one that knows the spirit of our times. Without this, they seek to return to its old pedestal all those things that should perish or be buried in the night of oblivion.” And with his usual humility: “Only I can save the world and no one else.” Napoleon Bonaparte, “Considérations sur l’état actuel de l’Europe,” in *Suite au Mémorial de Saint-Hélène*, [François Grille and Victor-Donatien Musset-Pathay], eds., vol. 2 (Brussels: De Mat, 1824), 283–284.

29. “Article officiel inséré dans la Gazette de Vienne du 26 avril, contre un article inséré dans le Journal de Paris du 4 avril 1815,” in *Acten des Wiener Congresses in den Jahren 1814 und 1815*, Johann Ludwig Klübner, ed., vol. 6 (Erlangen: Palm and Enke, 1816), 277.

30. Johann Jakob Engel, *Der Fürstenspiegel* [The mirror for princes] (Berlin: Myllius, 1802), 172.

retroactive criticism, attributing his awkward role during the French Revolution and his unfortunate end to his ineptness in dealing with the *zeitgeist*. One influential voice among those holding this view was Antoine Henri Jomini (1779–1869), a Swiss citizen who had made a career in the Napoleonic army before switching sides to the Russians in 1813 and later becoming a major authority on military strategy. In his estimation, the French Revolution as a whole had been a result of Louis XVI's failure to make the necessary "concessions to the spirit of the age."³¹ Like many others, Jomini was convinced that the revolution could have been avoided by a policy more in tune with the course of history: "[O]ne order consistent with the spirit of the times and the needs of the peoples would have sufficed to prevent the revolutionary explosion which has devastated France and set the whole of Europe aflame."³²

Turning the same argument on its head, it could be used as a weapon to ward off personal responsibility for crimes committed on behalf of the *zeitgeist*. In this way, Bertrand Barère (1755–1841), the last surviving member of the Committee of Public Safety, wrote in the introduction to his memoirs that he, personally, had never been one of those extraordinary individuals capable of making history:

I did not at all shape my epoch; I only did what I had to do, obey it. It sovereignly commanded so many peoples and kings, so many geniuses, so many talents, wills and even events that this submission to the era and this obedience to the spirit of the age [*esprit du siècle*] cannot be imputed to crime or fault.³³

Ultimately more consequential than such subtle maneuverings in the historical blame game, the "irresistible operation of the spirit of the age"³⁴ played a key part in liberal and radical arguments for social and political reform. In this context, *zeitgeist* was linked to concepts like enlightenment, reason, liberty, and utility and presented as a result of the inexorable progress of history.³⁵ Consequently, the concept constituted a crucial element in arguments for re-

31. Antoine-Henri Jomini, *Histoire critique et militaire des guerres de la Révolution*, new ed., vol. 1 (Paris: Anselin et Pochard, 1820), 119.

32. Ibid., 94. See also ibid., 101; August Hennings, "Was hätte geschehen müssen?," *Der Genius der Zeit* 2 (June 1794): 341–342.

33. Quoted in Hippolyte Carnot, "Notice historique sur Barère," in *Mémoires de B. Barère*, Hippolyte Carnot and Pierre-Jean David d'Angers, eds., vol. 1 (Brussels and Paris: Meline, Cans et compagnie, 1842), 9–10. The translation is taken from Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time: Making History* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2008), 70.

34. [James Keir], *An Account of the Life and Writings of Thomas Day, Esq.* (London: Stockdale, 1791), 138.

35. See, for example, Anonymous, "Fragmente über den Geist der Zeit," *Aurora*, 2 and 4 April 1804: 157–158, 161–162.

form, for the “reconfiguration, which the ... spirit of the age—menacing with a bloody finger—demands.”³⁶ It allowed authors to present their interpretation of history as inevitable, adding an emphatic warning that any resistance to the necessary adjustment of policy to “the times” would not only be futile, but dangerous. Thus, the menacing implications were clear enough when the historian Theophilus Camden lauded Pope Pius VII, who had negotiated the Concordat of 1801, for the fact that, compared to his predecessor Pius VI, he was “better acquainted with the spirit of the age,” knowing “how to bend like a willow beneath that storm, which would root up the opposing oak, and scatter its branches in the air.”³⁷

Certainly not everyone was equally convinced that man was fully at the mercy of the *zeitgeist*. Indeed, in the context of political discourse, its undetermined relation to human action was one of the concept’s most controversial aspects. Already in the earlier usages, primarily in literary and historical contexts, the question had been discussed of how some exceptional men (and in rare cases, women) could influence, guide, or even determine the spirit of their age, whereas others were its impotent subjects. In a political context, these debates gained a further edge. Regarding the French Revolution, for example, the question was frequently raised if it should be viewed as man-made at all. Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), one of the most influential counter-revolutionary authors, did not think so: “[I]t isn’t men who make the Revolution, rather, the Revolution employs men. One is quite right to say that *it moves all by itself*.”³⁸ While some tried to identify the heroes that made history, others revived old arguments about the constraints on human freedom in the face of determining historical circumstances. This controversy was further complicated by the fact that the spirit of the times was itself habitually discussed in a decidedly political vocabulary: it “reigned” or “ruled” and was said to possess “sovereignty” and “dominion”. Semantically, then, the *zeitgeist* was presented not just as a condition or restraint upon political action, but as a quasi-political actor itself. This tendency was further strengthened by verbal constructions personifying the spirit of the age, presenting it as an active force in history.³⁹

36. “Denkschrift derjenigen teutschen fürstlichen und gräflichen Häuser, welche durch die rheinische Bundes-Acte andern teutschen Fürsten als Standesherrn untergeordnet wurden,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 1 (1815), 19–20.

37. Theophilus Camden, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Overthrow of Napoleon Bonaparte* (London: Stratford, 1814), 465. See also Julius Franz Schneller, *Geschichte des Weltlaufes und des Zeitgeistes* [History of the way of the world and the spirit of the age], vol. 2 (Dresden: Hilscher, 1833), 71.

38. [Joseph de Maistre], *Considérations sur la France* (London, 1797), 15. Emphasis in the original. See also Georg Forster, “Parisische Umriss,” *Friedenspräliminarien* 1, no. 4 (1793): 356.

39. Johann Neeb, *Über den in verschiedenen Epochen der Wissenschaften allgemein herrschenden Geist und seinen Einfluss auf dieselben* [On the general reigning spirit in various

In reaction to what they perceived as spiritual fatalism, authors presenting themselves as “moderates” called on governments to regain at least some initiative from the *zeitgeist*. “Admittedly,” an anonymous author in the *Oppositions-Blatt* published in Weimar in 1817 opined, “where a true *zeitgeist* is present ... it is hard, perhaps impossible, to resist it.” But still any government worth its name would take it upon itself to guide the *zeitgeist* toward a positive course:

Insofar as the government of a people has to be deemed the pinnacle and epicenter of the national intelligence, it is its principle duty to create and lead the *zeitgeist*. ... Woe to the government that lets itself be fully guided by the *zeitgeist*, for it does not govern, but is governed, it does not lead, but is led.⁴⁰

From this perspective, the statesman’s principle object was to monitor the *zeitgeist* as best he could, to adjust to it when he had to, and to steer it in a more profitable direction when he had the opportunity. “Therefore,” as the Danish-French geographer and journalist Conrad Malte-Brun (1755–1826) somewhat equivocally concluded in an article on the topic, “a government must put itself at the head of opinion, and follow, while guiding and moderating it, the spirit of the age.”⁴¹ Still, even these self-styled moderates were quick to add that outright suppression of the *zeitgeist* would be as pointless as it would be perilous. “Every state that interprets the spirit of the age correctly and introduces it into its government,” wrote the Prussian officer August Wilhelm von Leipziger (1760–1829), “will be happy and peaceful—but unhappy that which resists it.”⁴²

scientific periods and its influence on them] (Frankfurt am Main: Andreä, 1795), 5–6; Johann Ludwig Ewald, *Wie nützt man am besten den Geist seines Zeitalters?* [How best to use the spirit of one’s age?] (Bremen: Wilmans, 1799), 16. Personification also allowed for the *zeitgeist*’s visualization in caricatures. The visual semantics of this concept—excluded from the present analysis—would merit further study. For the German case, see Frazer S. Clark, *Zeitgeist und Zerrbild: Word, Image and Idea in German Satire, 1800–1848* (Oxford: Lang, 2006).

40. Anonymous, “Schreiben aus Berlin, am 2. Februar 1817,” *Oppositions-Blatt oder Weimarische Zeitung*, Beilage no. 14 (18 February 1817): 108–109. See also August Hennings, “Ankündigung” [Announcement], *Der Genius der Zeit* 1 (January 1794), 1–4; Thimotheus Aclines, *Recht und Macht des Zeitgeistes* [Right and might of the spirit of the age] (Schleswig: Koch, 1824), 6–9.

41. Conrad Malte-Brun, “France,” *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 7 May 1818: 2–3.

42. August Wilhelm von Leipziger, *Ideal einer stehenden Armee im Geiste der Zeit* [Ideal of a standing army in the spirit of the age] (Berlin: s.n., 1808), 1–2. See also Arthur Young, *Travels, During the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (London: Bury St. Edmund’s, 1794), 258; [Johann Adam Bergk], *Der Congreß in Rastadt vor dem Richterstuhle der Vernunft* [The Congress of Rastatt before the tribunal of reason] (Rastadt und Großcairo [Jena]: s.n., 1799), 22; Dominique Dufour de Pradt, *Du Congrès de Vienne*, vol. 1 (Paris:

As these examples show, *zeitgeist* provided an extremely flexible and potentially highly effective rhetorical instrument in political debates. The specific political goals toward which its uses were pointed could be very diverse, a fact that becomes even more apparent when we consider the transactions of the Congress of Vienna, in which the spirit of the times was called upon to underscore arguments for such divergent causes as the proclamation of a (corporate) constitution,⁴³ Jewish emancipation,⁴⁴ the abolition of slavery,⁴⁵ a return to the pre-revolutionary legal order,⁴⁶ the principles of popular representation,⁴⁷ Catholic rights in Protestant territories,⁴⁸ the re-establishment of the hereditary German imperial nobility,⁴⁹ and the development of trade along the Rhine.⁵⁰

Counterstrategies

As diverse as the groups using the concept of *zeitgeist* as a rhetorical tool were, as politics typically goes, they all had opponents. To counter arguments re-

Deterville/Delaunay, 1815), 37–39; Louis Philippe de Ségur, “L’esprit du siècle,” in *Galérie morale et politique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Eymery, 1818), 385.

43. Karl Wilhelm von Bieberstein and Karl Christian von Berckheim, “Note der großherzoglich-badischen Bevollmächtigten an den k.k. österreichischen Staats- und Konferenz-Minister &c., Herrn Fürsten von Metternich, und eben so an den königl. preussischen Staatskanzler, Herrn Fürsten von Hardenberg wegen Einführung einer landständischen Verfassung,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 1 (1815), 100–101.

44. Karl August von Hardenberg, “Schreiben an den königlich preussischen Gesandten zu Hamburg, Herrn Grafen von Grothe, enthaltend den Auftrag, für die Verbesserung des bürgerlichen Zustandes der jüdischen Einwohner zu Hamburg, Lübek und Bremen, die angelegentlichste Verwendung eintreten zu lassen; auf Veranlassung ihres Abgeordneten an den wiener Congreß, D. Buchholz,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 1 (1815), 77–80.

45. “Déclaration des puissances sur l’abolition de la traite des nègres,” in *Acte du Congrès de Vienne, du 9 juin 1815*, Frédéric Schoell, ed. (Paris: Librairie Grecque-Latine-Allemande, 1815), 366–369.

46. “Denkschrift derjenigen teutschen fürstlichen und gräflichen Häuser,” 19–20.

47. Anonymous, “Haben die alten Landstände in den teutschen Bundesstaaten ein Recht, ihre Wiederherstellung zu fodern?,” *Neue Allemannia* 1 (1816): 2–3, 17–18.

48. Bevollmächtigte des Vorstandes der katholischen Gemeinde zu Frankfurt am Main, “Denkschrift bei dem hohen Congreß zu Wien übergeben, betreffend die Gerechtsame und verfassungsmässigen Verhältnisse der Gemeinde,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 1 (1815), 104–105.

49. “Memoire, der Bevollmächtigten des ehemaligen unmittelbaren teutschen Reichsadels, enthaltend politische Gründe für Erhaltung des unmittelbaren alten teutschen Reichsadels,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 1 (1815), 141.

50. Karl Christian von Berckheim, “Remarques concernant la convention à conclure d’un traité de commerce et de navigation sur le Rhin,” in Klübner, *Acten des Wiener Congresses*, vol. 3 (1815), 50.

volving around the concept, these in turn had to engage with it in one way or another. Contemporary counterstrategies to the concept can be divided into three major groups: (1) proposing an alternative interpretation of the spirit of the age; (2) agreeing with (part of) the interpretation of the current *zeitgeist*, but opposing its authority on the basis of the superiority of another (spiritual) force or principle; (3) questioning the use of the concept of *zeitgeist* itself on a metalinguistic level.

From a rhetorical point of view, the first counterstrategy was the simplest. It consisted in countering arguments invoking the character of the spirit of the age by simply proposing an alternative interpretation of it, thereby reopening the debate about who or what was in accordance with the *zeitgeist*. A prominent example of this type of reinterpretation is to be found in the work of François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848), who in 1814, shortly after Napoleon's first fall from power, wrote: "Everything changes, everything is destroyed, everything passes. To serve one's nation, one has to comply with the revolutions that the ages bring along; and, to be the man of one's country, one has to be the man of one's time."⁵¹ This man had, he conceded, for some time been "Buonaparte"—as he now once again called the former emperor. But at present, this was no longer the case. Rather, it was Louis XVIII who, on account of his enlightened ideas, his prudence, and general moderation, was best attuned to the current *zeitgeist*.⁵²

The second counterstrategy functioned on a different level: instead of proposing an alternative interpretation of the *zeitgeist*, it provided an alternative to it, introducing a different (and ultimately higher) spiritual principle opposed to the current *zeitgeist*. To contemporaries who were outraged about the sudden changes recent history had brought, the spirit of the age appeared as a "demon"⁵³ and adaptation to it as the slavish submission to a cluster of catastrophic inclinations. In this vein, the counter-revolutionary au-

51. François-René de Chateaubriand, *Réflexions politiques sur quelques écrits du jour et sur les intérêts de tous les français* [Political reflections on some current writings and on the interests of all Frenchmen] (Paris: Le Normant, 1814), 89–90.

52. Chateaubriand, *De Buonaparte, des Bourbons, et de la nécessité de se rallier à nos princes légitimes, pour le bonheur de la France et celui de l'Europe* [On Buonaparte, the Bourbons, and the necessity to rally behind our legitimate princes, for the happiness of France and Europe] (Paris: Mame frères, 1814), 58–59.

53. Thomas Harral, *The Demon of the Age: Or, Signs of the Times Explained* (London: Wright, 1821). See also J. G. Rhode, "Wie kann man dem, unser Zeitalter charakterisirenden, in so vieler Hinsicht verderblichen Revolutionsgeist, am sichersten entgegen wirken?" *Berlinisches Archiv der Zeit und ihres Geschmacks* 2 (September 1799): 193–205; George Burges, *Reflections on the Nature and Tendency of the Present Spirit of the Times* (Norwich: Burks and Kinnebrook, 1819), 93; Xaver Maßl, *Der Zeitgeist in unseren Tagen in religiös-sittlicher Hinsicht* [The spirit of the age in our time from a religious-moral perspective] (Landshut: Thomann, 1827), 6.

thor Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise de Bonald (1754–1840) identified the *zeitgeist* as “the spirit of hatred for authority” and the “fanaticism of false doctrines,” adding that “similar to such malign humors passing through the human body, at times throwing themselves against one part, then against another, until they erupt and become a gnawing ulcer, these hateful and seditious dispositions only reach completion in revolutions that push them out and consume them.” Drawing the logical conclusion from his political diagnosis, he warned the leadership of Europe not to believe that they would be able “to prevent these [results] by making concessions to the spirit of the age. This spirit, which is nothing but hateful, jealous and greedy passions, won’t be satisfied until it will have destroyed everything, and won’t destroy itself until it finds no more food for its ravages.”⁵⁴ Calling the *zeitgeist* an “ugly tyrant,” its reign “despotism,” and its temporal subjects its “slaves,” conservative authors called for active opposition to its reign.⁵⁵ As one German poet wrote: “Do you know the spirit of the times, then attack and riot / till it dies! ... Chase it! Make it your main enterprise / to be dangerous to him! Chase it, till it dies!”⁵⁶

These pejorative political uses could tie in with the established tradition of usage in religious contexts. In general, it has to be stressed that although from the late eighteenth century onward the concept of *zeitgeist* gained a strong political dimension, this does not imply that other types of usage simply disappeared. Although it would be legitimate to say that the concept was politicized, the precise meaning of this claim needs to be clarified. Too often, this type of conceptual change is described in terms of a total displacement of one type of usage by another. Although such a radical shift in meaning is possible in principle, in practice it is highly unusual. Semantics, once established, are on the whole extremely resilient. The complete disappearance of a certain linguistic

54. Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise de Bonald, “Sur les Circonstances présentes,” *Le Conservateur* 5 (1819): 170–171.

55. [B.], “Zwey Briefe, gefunden in dem Portefeuille eines preußischen, in der Schlacht bey Jena gebliebenen Officers,” *Neue Feuerbrände zum brennen und leuchten* 1, no. 1 (1808): 3–5; Ignaz Heinrich von Wessenberg, *Der Geist des Zeitalters: Ein Denkmal des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts, zum Besten des neunzehnten errichtet* [The spirit of the age: A monument to the eighteenth century, erected for the benefit of the nineteenth] (Zürich: Orell, Füssli und Compagnie, 1801), 43–45; Joseph Anton Sambuga, *Über den Philosophismus welcher unser Zeitalter bedroht* (Munich: Lentner, 1805), 25–26; Johann Jakob Hess, “Aufforderung an die, welche bereits zwischen Tugend und Laster, Religion und Gottesvergessenheit, die Wahl getroffen haben,” in *Der Christ bey Gefahren des Vaterlandes: Predigten zur Revolutionszeit gehalten*, vol. 1 (Winterthur: Steiner, 1799), 395.

56. Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, “Der Geist der Zeit,” *Minerva* 1 (1799): 181–183. See also Augustin Hacklinger, *Noch einmal ein Paar Worte zu seiner Zeit, an den hochwürdigen Klerus* [A few more contemporary words, to the esteemed clergy] (Munich: Hübschmann, 1803), 38; Anonymous, *Coup-d’œil sur l’esprit du siècle* [Glance upon the spirit of the age] (Paris: Dentu, 1821), 158.

possibility (in favor of others) is highly uncommon, and will often involve an extremely long-term process. Generally, older usages will remain “alive” among specific groups of language users, in specific genres or linguistic contexts. This is what happened to the concept of *zeitgeist*. As mentioned above, the concept had originated in the spheres of religious, literary, and historical discourse. These dimensions remained present, even as the concept was progressively “politicized”. In the writings of historians (of literature or tout court) as well as from the pulpit, nonpolitical usage remained the rule.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, even these seemingly traditional usages did not remain quite the same. It is a general truth that once one element of a semantic structure changes, the whole is changed with it. Even those elements of usage that on first glance seem unaffected are, by virtue of their altered relative position to other, new possibilities, changed. The concept of *zeitgeist* provides an exemplary case of these second-order effects in that its newer political connotations unwillingly encroached upon seemingly nonpolitical usage as well. Thus, in the context of early nineteenth-century usage, the same negative interpretations of *zeitgeist* that had been part of religious discourse for centuries now gained definite political connotations. The same was true of seemingly neutral usages in academic contexts. Regardless of the specific author’s intentions, any utterance about the *zeitgeist* now faced the risk of being interpreted as a political statement.

What to some may have been a surprising and undesirable effect of *zeitgeist*’s changing meaning, others could use to their rhetorical advantage. The familiar and well-established religious vocabulary could be a powerful semantic resource to be deployed against the political *zeitgeist*. Thus, to push home his political point, de Bonald stressed the fact that “whatever is called the spirit of the age, enlightenment of the age, progress of reason, etc.,” its current dominance notwithstanding, remained “only human,”⁵⁸ subject to human error, lacking divine sanction and a sense for anything “elevated, absolute, general.”⁵⁹ In the same manner, the Catholic preacher Prince Alexander von Hohenlohe (1794–1849) called on his flock to “rise above the evil spirit of the age,” to “keep aloof from the world and to adhere to the supernatural.”⁶⁰ These authors

57. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, vol. 7 (Riga: Hartknoch, 1796), 140; Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, *Die Siegesgeschichte der Christlichen Religion* (Nuremberg: Raw, 1799), 199; Jean Paul, *Levana*, vol. 1 (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1807), 108–109; Louis Henry Bähler, *La vérité de Jésus Christ, esprit du siècle, et la réformation: Sermon sur Jean XVII: 17* (Amsterdam: Gastman, 1824); Anonymous, *Le christianisme et le protestantisme sont-ils deux choses distinctes?* (Paris: Servier, 1828), 5.

58. Louis-Gabriel-Ambroise de Bonald, “Sur un écrit de M. Camille Jordan,” *Le Conservateur* 1 (1818): 255–256.

59. De Bonald, “Sur les Circonstances présentes,” 153.

60. Alexander von Hohenlohe, *Was ist der Zeitgeist?* (s.l.: s.n., 1820), 21. See also [Ernst Zimmermann], “Wie haben wir uns bei der ersten Stimme Gottes in der Geschichte unse-

contrasted the *zeitgeist* with other, superior historical forces, either envisioned as an alternative spirit (the “Spirit of Christianity,”⁶¹ the “Spirit of Truth and of Virtue”⁶²) or as a variety of supposedly “timeless” phenomena and institutions (“real” philosophy, manners, virtue and religion, the church, the constitution, the law) which seemed to provide a stable counterweight to the fickle and capricious nature of the *zeitgeist*.⁶³

A third and final type of counterstrategy open to the opponents of those employing the concept of *zeitgeist* in political discourse functioned on a reflexive, metalinguistic level. Instead of redefining or attacking the *zeitgeist*, some authors called the concept itself into question as “a fashionable word, which fits into every chitchat, but by which one cannot think anything clear at all.”⁶⁴ By casting doubt upon its epistemological or ontological legitimacy, they tried to undermine the political arguments revolving around it. Was there really such a thing as a *zeitgeist*? And even if there was, who could rightfully claim to know what it was?

Unsurprisingly, the special insight into the character of the age, depending upon the correct identification of the “signs of the times” and their accurate interpretation with reference to its “spirit”, was often viewed skeptically. On the one hand, the incredible power of synthesis needed to capture all the separate phenomena of an age in their underlying unity could seem superhuman.⁶⁵ On the other, the possibility of leaving one’s own particular perspective behind to objectively ascertain the character of the era as a whole was often questioned.⁶⁶ As the theologian and educator to the Prussian Prince Albrecht, Wilhelm Nienstädt (1784–1862) argued in his *Versuch einer Darstellung unsrer Zeit* (1819), in his view, no individual could surmount his or her own particular perspective:

rer Zeit zu verhalten?,” in *Patriotische Predigten zur Zeit der Wiederbefreiung Deutschlands gehalten* (Darmstadt: Heyer und Leske, 1814), 153.

61. Gilbert Wakefield, *The Spirit of Christianity Compared with the Spirit of the Times in Great Britain*, new ed. (London: Eaton, 1794).

62. Von Wessenberg, *Der Geist des Zeitalters*, 44.

63. Sambuga, *Über den Philosophismus*, xi, 300; Chateaubriand, “France,” *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 5 June 1817: 2–4; Anonymous, “Mémorial of the Late Cardinal Albani,” *The Athenæum* 3, no. 17 (1 May 1808): 447; Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, *Über Inhalt und Vortrag, Entstehung und Schicksale des königlichen Buchs, eines Werks von der Regierungskunst* [On the content and presentation, development and fate of the royal book, a work on the art of government] (Berlin: Nicolai, 1811), 25.

64. August von Kotzebue, “Kleine literarische Notizen,” *Literarisches Wochenblatt* 1, no. 18 (1818): 143.

65. Harro Wilhelm Dirksen, *Ueber Stärke der Seele* (Sulzbach: Seidel, 1810), 226–227.

66. Friedrich Schiller, “Ueber die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen,” *Die Horen* 1, no. 1 (1795): 47; Ewald, *Wie nützt man*, 60–68; Steffens, *Ueber die Idee der Universitäten* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1809), 106.

[N]o matter how elevated a position he may take and how far his gaze may rush through the territories of knowledge, [man] can never deny the bounds of his particular existence, but in everything he pursues, he will involuntarily convey the imprint of his experiences and surroundings, the language and manners to which he is accustomed, and innumerable other conditions, that, be they constraining or facilitating, enclose him. We may try to appear indiscriminate and unbiased, still we remain unaware that our memory of an early impression, of a significant event, may be erased in us, but not its lasting impact.⁶⁷

Following this line of argument, the recourse to spirit of the age as an explanatory category or a source of political legitimacy was called into question. In turn, this provoked questions about the ulterior motives behind its use. As the historian William Roscoe (1753–1831) saw it, the concept ultimately did nothing more than mask some authors' intellectual laziness. Akin to terms like "chance" or "accident", to his mind "the spirit of the age" presented just "another phrase for causes and circumstances which have not hitherto been sufficiently explained. It is the province of the historian to trace and to discover these causes, and it is only in proportion as he accomplishes this object, that his labors are of any utility."⁶⁸

In the context of political discourse, questions about the legitimacy of the concept of *zeitgeist* shed an even more dubious light upon those purporting to be its mouthpiece. Suspicions were raised that "the pompous term of the spirit of the age often does nothing but veil the pretensions of the spirit of party."⁶⁹ Thus, this so-called spirit was exposed as nothing more than a smoke screen, a rhetorical instrument in the hands of self-interested groups or individuals.⁷⁰ Writing about the Swiss Revolution, the counter-revolutionary travel writer, librarian, and publisher Heinrich August Ottokar Reichard (1751–1828) in his *Revolutions-Almanach* (1798) pointed out that

[i]t was not the spirit of the times that ruined Switzerland—that spirit which is now held up in *terrorem* [*sic*] to awe the weak, and to dupe the credulous,

67. [Wilhelm Nienstädt], *Versuch einer Darstellung unsrer Zeit*, vol. 1, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1819), 8. See also Moritz Gottlieb Saphir, "Volksschmeichler und Zeitgeist-Verdreher," in *Nesselblätter der Zeit und des Lebens* (Munich: Lindauer 1832), 36–37; Moritz Gottlieb Saphir, "Unser Zeitgeist in Feuer- und Wassergefahr: Eine humoristische Federzeichnung," in *Humoristische Leuchtkugeln* (Vienna: Von Haykul, 1835), 27.

68. William Roscoe, *The Life and Pontificate of Leo the Tenth*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Cadell, 1806), xxxviii.

69. Malte-Brun, "France," 2. See also Anonymous, "Le Mémorial catholique," *Revue française* 5 (September 1828): 258.

70. Anonymous, "Gespräch zwischen dem Grafen Altenburg und Baron Neurode, über die Patrimonial-Jurisdiction und dem Erblichen Unterschied der Stände im Königreich Preußen," *Minerva* 4 (December 1808): 500–502; Ségur, "L'esprit du siècle," 582.

in order to keep them in a state of alarm, favorable to the views of those who are friends to the Revolution and to make them believe, that fate has determined that it shall crush, with irresistible force, all established constitutions. This spirit of the times is nothing more than a spirit of tumult and innovation; mere playhouse thunder, in force and effect; an impotent machine incapable of overturning a house of cards, when its powers of subversion and destruction are not aided by external tyranny and oppression, by the lethargy and imbecility of sovereigns.⁷¹

Building upon such arguments, the most fundamental criticisms of the concept of *zeitgeist* called its existence per se into question. In a post-Enlightenment world, the existence and ontological status of spiritual forces beyond perceptible reality was, to say the least, disputed, leading opponents to satirically equate the “spirit of the age” with a ghost, phantom, or poltergeist.⁷² “Sure enough,” wrote the German playwright August von Kotzebue (1761–1819),

everyone speaks about the *zeitgeist*; everyone points to it as to a specter that—with horror—one sees wandering about, but that no one dare touch. ... It is with this specter as with all other specters: when one tears away the white cloth, an ordinary human being stands behind it.⁷³

On one level, such “metaphysical” criticism of the concept was an argument of pure philosophy, just as the many humorous accounts about the “specter of the times” were pure satire. On another, however, they had a definite political impetus as counter-arguments against claims about the spirit of the age and its political consequences.

Conclusion

From the second half of the eighteenth century onward, the temporalization of discourses of cultural reflection ushered in a new understanding of history and man’s place in it. In its wake, arguments about the role of time in politics gained a new dimension in the idea that political action should not just be

71. Heinrich August Ottokar Reichard, *Revolutions-Almanach von 1799* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1798), 38. Translated in Anonymous, “[Review of] *Revolutions Almanach von 1799*,” *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 1 (December 1798): 793.

72. Malte-Brun, “France,” 2; Ludwig Börne, “Das Gespenst der Zeit,” *Die Wage* 2, no. 5 (1821): 28–33. For contrary opinions, see Von Leipziger, *Ideal einer stehenden Armee im Geiste der Zeit* (Berlin: s.n, 1808), 24; [Fr.], “Einige Erfahrungen aus den letzten Feldzügen und fromme Wünsche für Teutschland,” *Nemesis* 3, no. 3 (1814): 356–357.

73. August von Kotzebue, “Politische Gegenstände,” *Literarisches Wochenblatt* 1, no. 5 (1818): 34.

prudent or virtuous, but time-specific, that is, in tune with the character of the times. As the case of the concept of the *spirit of the age* shows, this had profound effects on rhetorical strategies in political discourse. The concept was used to invoke a metapolitical realm, above and beyond everyday politics, which not only provided an interpretative framework for current events, actors, and developments, but could foster arguments both for and against specific courses of action. As a rhetorical device, its political use was derived from its apparent nonpolitical nature. In terms of *zeitgeist*, political claims could be formulated with reference to a realm of metapolitical conditions of political action, providing actors with the opportunity to cloak arguments about desirability as arguments of historical possibility or even inevitability.

The concept's versatility is reflected in the fact that it could never fully be appropriated by one specific group. References to the *zeitgeist* were used by political actors in power as well as in the opposition. Most commonly, they were voiced by actors that—with some freedom of expression—may perhaps be termed public intellectuals: authors outside the direct sphere of political responsibility, attempting to convert their literary or academic prestige to political influence by putting forward their opinions in a variety of public fora. To them, *zeitgeist* provided an especially attractive tool in that it helped them to present their political counsel as something more than just another criticism from the sidelines or attempt at self-interested manipulation. Claiming superior insight into the exigencies of the times and their political implications, such authors tried to underpin the authority of their views in terms of a special understanding. What they voiced was, they implied, neither their own perspective nor that of a particular party. Rather, they were the mouthpiece of the spirit of the age itself.

Tracing the use of *zeitgeist* across the political field, the concept's versatility receives yet another dimension. Although in contemporary metalinguistic observation, *zeitgeist* was often associated with liberal (or even radical) reformism, in fact it was used across the political spectrum. Whether from a positive or negative viewpoint, all kinds of political actors in some manner tried to make the most of a valuable rhetorical tool. In turn, the explosive rise of the concept of *zeitgeist* in political discourse provoked a number of counterstrategies, ranging from alternative interpretations of the *zeitgeist*, through opposition to the *zeitgeist* in the name of another, higher, and non-historical principle, to metalinguistic arguments calling into question the epistemological and ontological legitimacy of the concept itself. In this way, debates about the *zeitgeist* gained a second-order dimension that was not just reflexive, but in the contemporary semantic context had its own political gist.

In conclusion, it may be fruitful to briefly consider *zeitgeist's* place in the wider semantic landscape, particularly in relation to other temporalized concepts used in early nineteenth-century political discourse. Although the con-

cept was never included in the lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, it could easily have been. As shown in this article, it exhibited all the characteristics of a modern socio-political concept as famously established by Koselleck in his introduction.⁷⁴ Building upon a temporalized understanding of the socio-political world, the concept became progressively politicized, such that debates about political policy and purpose often revolved around conflicting interpretations of the *zeitgeist*. The possibility of such controversy was a direct consequence of the concept's abstract nature. Lacking a basis in intersubjectively verifiable experience, the *zeitgeist* was open to multiple and mutually incompatible ideological interpretations.⁷⁵ Yet at the same time, in the manner of a collective singular noun (*Kollektivsingular*), it implied the fundamental unity and supreme consequence of its signified object. This combustible mix of high stakes and ultimate unresolvability resulted in unremitting debates, which in turn boosted the concept's ever-wider dissemination. Contemporary metalinguistic comments on this semantic paradox—be they satirical or indignant in tone—did not in any way hinder its diffusion. Rather, they added yet another, highly fertile dimension to the concept's already wide spectrum of usage.

Yet for all this apparent familiarity, in some respects the concept of *zeitgeist* provides an informative contrast to other, more familiar conceptual histories. As Koselleck pointed out, many temporalized concepts derived their political versatility and power from the fact that they pointed to expectations of a future not yet realized in past or present experience. This phenomenon is exemplified in the various “-isms” that shaped the nineteenth- and twentieth-century political landscape.⁷⁶ The liberty, equality, humanity, or community these concepts pointed to were all predicated upon a vision of man as he would ultimately become, not as he already was. Claims about these future goals as well as about the means to achieve them thus lacked a verifiable basis in accumulated experience, such that debate about them could go on indefinitely. In contrast to such temporal “compensatory concepts,” as Koselleck called them, the fundamental openness of the concept of *zeitgeist*—ensuring its multi-interpretability and political versatility—was not derived from an open future, but rather from the open character of the present itself. Although certainly

74. Reinhart Koselleck, “Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*,” trans. Michaela Richter, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 1 (2011), 10–15.

75. The category of “democratization” seems at first glance less easily applicable, although it could be linked to the fact that the *zeitgeist*'s prime movers were no longer exclusively sought among princes and nobility, but could include historical greats of lesser descent as well as “the people” itself.

76. Koselleck, “Introduction,” 12; Koselleck, “Neuzeit: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 249–250.

embedded in a temporalized understanding of the relationship between past, present, and future, the concept's focus in political contexts lay clearly on the present.⁷⁷ In contrast to other temporalized concepts, its contestability therefore did not result from the unavailability of experience, but rather from its overabundance. Contrary to what Koselleck seems to suggest, the ideological charging of the present thus did not always depend upon "concepts of movement whose burden of proof can only be summoned up in the future."⁷⁸ Rather, the concept of *zeitgeist* shows that within the temporalized semantic framework, the character of the present itself was just as viable a field of political contestation. Instead of presenting a firm basis of evidence anchored in verifiable facts, the present's spiritual identity provided quite as much room for contestation as the expectation of the future, offering a fertile matrix for political controversy.

77. Of course, in historiographical contexts, it remained tuned toward the past.

78. Koselleck, "Neuzeit," 254.