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Big data, small concepts: histosophy as an approach to *longue-durée* history

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, we sketch out a method, *histosophy*, which makes possible the study of intellectual history and conceptual genealogy both in depth and over long periods of time. Histosophy uses digital tools to survey 'large issues within small compasses.' A genealogy of signifiers, it considers metonymic parts of a problem in order to contribute precisely and coherently to a larger perspective. We outline the theoretical contours of our approach. We exemplify how it works in practice by looking at the signifier 'esprit de corps', the study of which is presented in detail in the histosophical book *The Genealogy of Esprit de Corps* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). The phrase 'esprit de corps' has been widely used since the eighteenth century in different discourses (political, military, sociological, etc.), but it is sufficiently limited that its genealogy can be traced across centuries and nations with precision, coherence, clarity, and with the help of automated search engines. By contrast, related but bigger concepts like freedom, individualism or solidarity are part of dozens of disparate and fuzzy discourses, so often uttered that the analysis of modern uses is problematic. The histosophical methodology is applicable in six discrete stages, here outlined.

KEYWORDS

Histosophy; genealogy; longue-durée; big data; intellectual history; esprit de corps

1. Introduction. Histosophy and the avoidance of a frontal study of big contested concepts

Historians of ideas deal with 'webs of belief'.¹ To grasp the structure of these webs, they examine texts or data, and they propose an interpretation of a specific historical corpus. In the words of Mark Bevir, 'the first task of the historian of ideas is to use relics from the past to reconstruct as historical objects the weak intentions that constitute the hermeneutic meanings of utterances made in the past.'² Today we can significantly augment the size of our corpora of reference thanks to the partial automation of research and new data-gathering techniques. A new historical practice of *longue-durée* intellectual history therefore seems possible, as some have noted. But is it compatible with the study of grand contested concepts over a long period?

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We share David Armitage's anticipatory aspiration, expressed in the *History Manifesto*, that historians should 'think about the past in order to see the future.'³ We also maintain that it is important to reflect on global problems by identifying ideological or epochal patterns in the study of long periods of human and social time. The challenge is to develop methodologies that somewhat avoid the pitfalls of 'epochalism', a reifying tendency to construct ideological or teleological patterns regarding large historical constructs.⁴ Conversely, historians of ideas need to avoid making conceptual history into a string of disparate and contested utterances that are put together without a significant meta-narrative. In this essay, we sketch out a possible solution to this dilemma, *histosophy*, which we believe makes possible the study of intellectual history both in depth and over long periods of time.

Our starting point is Gallie's idea of 'essentially contested concepts'. We take his proposition seriously, namely that some concepts are too polemic, too ambitious, ever to allow a unifying perspective.⁵ Rather than treating highly-complex and multi-faceted large concepts such as democracy, freedom, solidarity, or sovereignty, we propose to focus strategically on small signifiers, limited notions or relics that do have long-term resonance and are uttered in large issue debates, but retain relatively manageable meanings and exhaustively observable utterances over a long period of time. Put differently, what differentiates histosophy from other approaches to intellectual history or genealogy is that it proposes to survey 'large issues within small compasses.'⁶

In this essay, we mostly outline the theoretical contours of our approach, but we have also considered how it might work in practice by looking at one concept as a case study: the signifier 'esprit de corps', the study of which is presented in detail in the histosophical book *The Genealogy of Esprit de Corps* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019). The phrase 'esprit de corps' has been widely used since the eighteenth century in different discourses (political, military, sociological, etc.), but it is sufficiently limited that its use can be traced across centuries and nations with relative clarity. By contrast, a term like freedom is part of dozens of disparate, contradictory, or contested discourses, so often uttered that the analysis of its modern uses would take an entire team of researchers, and years to make sense of the data and available documents. An under-rated phrase like 'esprit de corps' – not necessarily stable but much less frequently uttered than a word like 'freedom' – can be studied over three centuries, in several geopolitical zones (for example France, UK, USA), and one single person is able to analyse most of its facets in print in a few years of work.

Moreover, the analysis of the genealogy of 'esprit de corps' sheds an interesting light on much larger questions, such as the ideological origins of the nation, the tensions between universalism and particularism, or *laissez-faire* and corporatism, and the concerns of corruption and bias in human groups. By looking at large issues with a small lens, we might be able to address larger concepts more accurately by means of a cluster of smaller concepts. Or, to put it another way, histosophy, which is a genealogy of signifiers, is a synecdochic approach; it considers a metonymic part of a problem in order to contribute to a coherent perspective. The modern relationship between a (small) concept like 'esprit de corps' and a (big) concept like 'solidarity' for example could be compared to the relationship between the term 'laissez-faire', another small notion, and 'freedom'. This does not mean that the intellectual history of 'laissez-faire' would exhaust and replace the study of the modern idea of freedom. Rather, we are suggesting that studying 'laissez-faire' or another very specific signifier in the manner detailed below would offer a useful and precise entry point into larger issues that might blind us if we look at them directly.

Histoscopy does not need to be limited to words or concepts. It can also be used as a way of analysing physical, material and symbolic objects. We can contribute to a cultural history of globalisation in the twentieth-century by focusing on the sole history of containers⁷ or neon signs.⁸ Neon signs are a perfect metonymical object revealing a strong cultural imaginary across various human activities. They provide a possible foundation – or lens – through which to illuminate – from one well-defined perspective – a trend like globalisation. The limited nature of each histosophical object allows for careful contextualisation and a manageable set of data, without sacrificing the *longue durée* and *large issue* perspective that underpins a genealogical effort.

2. The conflictual marriage between intellectual history and long-term history

Our approach acknowledges the importance of context for the study of ideas. We accept that – because of their imprecision and polysemy – ideas must be contextualised historically. Such contextualisation allows historians to draw lines between different webs of belief and, where appropriate, identify patterns in the socio-historical use of ideas. Clearly, looking at notions to understand history goes along with looking at history to understand notions. There is a continuously dynamic relationship between ideas and their contexts. As Richard Whatmore puts it:

Intellectual historians accept that ideas matter as first-order information about social phenomena and as directly revealing facts about our world that cannot be described except by reference to ideas. As such ideas are social forces. They may be shaped by other forces but they themselves, in turn, always influence the human world.⁹

Certainly, the notion that ideas are social forces is not self-evident and has its own history. We are not advocating here, for instance, Alfred Fouillée’s fascinating meta-historical notion of the ‘*idée-force*’ that emphasises how ideas, once formulated, tend to their own social realisation through successive approximations.¹⁰ Contrary to mathematical formulae, and despite attempts to isolate universal unit-ideas,¹¹ concepts cannot easily be separated from the argumentative uses human groups make of them. At the political and social level, arguments between humans and social groups often take a turn that shapes significant historical events. As implied by Gallie’s emphasis on the notion of contestation to the field of history, we seem to be an ‘argumentative’ species with agonistic worldviews.¹² This explains why context is such a crucial variable. Some would argue that it is *the* most important variable in understanding the history of ideas. To quote Quentin Skinner:

There cannot be a history of unit ideas as such, but only a history of the various uses to which they have been put by different agents at different times. [...] Our concepts not only alter over time, but are incapable of providing us with anything more than a series of changing perspectives on the world in which we live and have our being. Our concepts form part of what we bring to the world in our efforts to understand it. [...] We need to treat our normative concepts less as statements about the world than as tools and weapons of debate.¹³

This quotation encapsulates the core of what has been called the Cambridge School of Political Thought, according to which ‘we need to grasp not merely the meaning of what is said’, but also what the utterance is ‘doing’.¹⁴ Notions are considered as ‘language acts’

which follow certain ‘assumptions’, taking place in ‘complex normative systems’, where ‘facts, values and roles and intricately and ambiguously related’, and where ‘the conveying of information may have complex normative and political consequences’.¹⁵ John Pocock – another founder of the Cambridge School – calls these argumentative fields ‘languages’, comparable to ideological social games that produce and are produced by socio-political worldviews.

There are some problems with this approach, many of which have been discussed elsewhere.¹⁶ What interests us, however, is the problem of scale. A Skinnerian analysis can be performed on a small corpus of a texts (by one thinker) or a relatively constrained conversation between a few thinkers. But it does not work well when we radically increase the scale of conceptual movement across centuries and cultures. For instance, it seems complicated to perform a fine-grained contextual analysis on an extremely diverse concept like ‘revolution’ over, say, the last two centuries. Nor does the approach work in mass democratic polities, with hundreds of thousands – sometimes millions – of people actively engaged in political discussion in print, through elections, or on the internet.

It is perhaps not surprising that the issue of scale should be a troubling one for intellectual historians. The kind of exhaustive close reading required in order to reconstruct ideas in their context is extremely labour intensive. Given the effort required, it is difficult to imagine reproducing such a method horizontally, i.e. over a large corpus of texts and a long period of history. But these practical and logistical difficulties have only been reinforced by the unwillingness of some intellectual historians to propose an interpretative meta-narrative, a big picture or a ‘big idea’ to analyse a battlefield of ideas.¹⁷ Orthodox intellectual historians are more often than not suspicious of long-term or paradigmatic approaches to history.

Still, there are signs that historians have begun once again to try to take seriously longer periods and big narratives. We could trace this back to Fernand Braudel and the *École des Annales*, who pioneered the historical practice of surveying long-term periods of time (decades or centuries) in order to propose sweeping interpretations of socio-historical phenomena.¹⁸ The emergence of Marxist-inspired ‘civilizational’ history (for instance, the work of Emmanuel Wallerstein) and social history (for instance, the work of E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm) continued this endeavour of examining broad trends in the history of society, economy and ideas. But, as Armitage reminds us, some of these forms of big history declined as the twentieth-century’s grand ideologies came apart.¹⁹ The powerful criticism of Marxist frames of analysis in the 1970s and 1980s was particularly important in this regard since it undermined a fundamental methodological source for big history.

It is significant, therefore, that we are now witnessing a popular but also academic interest for ‘big’ history, sometimes even for what we would call ‘enormous’ history, whether in the form of the *Freakonomics* series that purports to explain forms of collective behaviour or popular books like Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs and Steel*, and Yuval Noah Harari’s *Brief History of Humankind*.²⁰ Precisely because of the atrophy of grand ideologies in a post-Cold War and post-Communist world, lay readers have enthusiastically embraced these wide-ranging and sometimes simplistic approaches to the history of society. And, as Armitage and Guldi’s *History Manifesto* suggests, even academics have been drawn

into this trend, as the example of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* shows.²¹

A precondition for the re-emergence of so-called big history has been the parallel rise of so-called big data. This technological innovation has allowed researchers in the humanities and the social sciences to analyse and process more information than was humanely possible only ten years ago. Much of the popular literature that uses big data treats it as relatively neutral.²² The data seems to exist in a liminal, empty space and the coincidences it creates are treated as if produced scientifically, instead of understanding that, even big data is hostage to subjective selection and interpretation. Moreover, big data makes it even easier to reify ideas and concepts, a tendency that has always been a danger for intellectual or cultural historians. Big data, like small data, cannot be an end in itself; it must be deployed within a framework that recognises the capacity human agents have of creating concepts and narratives – and, indeed, the crucial role that power dynamics play within the conceptual sphere.²³

These caveats notwithstanding, the question of the *longue-durée* study of ideas deserves to be considered anew today because of our access to digital tools that allow one researcher to consider the written use of terms much more exhaustively, with the help of large databases of texts and more precise automatic search engines. To quote Armitage again:

The promise of the digital humanities for transforming the work of intellectual historians is immense. [...] And with ever greater flexibility for searching and recovering contextual information, we can discover more precisely and persuasively moments of rupture as well as stretches of continuity. In short, we now have both the methodological tools and the technological means to overcome most, if not all, of the traditional objections to the marriage of intellectual history with the *longue durée*. We can at last get back to studying big ideas in a big way.²⁴

Histosophy studies big ideas, but in a more discrete way. It is an attempt to make sense of ideas across long periods of human history in a way that focuses on a precise semantic pattern and its genealogy, while avoiding the double dispersion that occurs when talking about very specific contexts or very large contested concepts.

Before exploring in more depth the way histosophy can be used to analyse ideas, it is worth clarifying the methodology that underpins it. As we have seen, histosophy is the *longue-durée* genealogy of small signifiers used repetitively in debates or environments over a long period of time. The cultural, intellectual or political process to which they refer can vary, but because they are not big noisy or fuzzy notions (like freedom, democracy, capital, revolution, etc.), they can be studied across discourses and cultures by avoiding the over-interpretative dangers of contested big concepts. At a more theoretical level, histosophy is the choice to be neither a 'pure historian' – someone who believes in the objectivity of facts, independent of a historian's perspective – nor a 'pure philosopher' – someone who believes in the objectivity of truth and concepts independent of a philosophical style and temporal evolution. We envisage histosophy as a critical method that should, if possible, avoid the insularity of both approaches.

If we consider small signifiers semantically related to large issues, it is possible to do a critical history of webs of belief and significance and how they communicate with each other through space and time. We acknowledge, with Gallie, that identifying the eternal truth of a big concept is a vain attempt to exit the constant argumentative character of

human discourse.²⁵ We recognise the fact that objectivity, if any, arises from our criticising and comparing rival webs of theories. By looking at the rhetoric and argumentative perspectives implied by past discourses instead of looking at them as pure data or facts without ideology, we can neutralise the ‘enormous history’ temptation to impose a forced over-encompassing scheme into past history, for example in the form of an essentialised human nature. At the same time, by looking at the historical reasons that might explain past generalisations on the philosophy of history, nature of mankind, or spirit of an epoch, we can show how our idealisations and essentialisations are themselves influenced by the discursive structure of an epoch or by a web of belief.

How might we imagine a research project using this approach? We propose six discrete stages that should underpin any histosophical analysis:

1. Identify a small signifier that is a good lens on large issues. It can be a word, a phrase, or a material object.
2. Look at the channels and networks through which the signifier’s uses evolve in different contexts and time periods.
3. Explore and analyse turning points, geographical zones, or watershed moments when the signifier was widely used (these would be represented as ‘spikes’ in the data).
4. Assess the extent to which individuals, corporations, or institutions had a particularly prominent role and interest in pushing the term or object.
5. Compile a list of meanings or connotations over time that may have influenced other neighbouring – or larger – concepts and issues.
6. See if the results allow for a meta-narrative or a reinterpretation of that large issue.

Throughout this process, typical close reading strategies would be employed at specific junctures (for example, to explain a ‘spike’ in the data). The key point is that all six stages are feasible for the individual researcher in less than a decade, even if the approach can be multiplied across a larger team, each of whom would be responsible for a small signifier within the semantic field of a large issue. For example, if we wish to understand the multifarious modern tension between groupthink and individualism, a fine-grained histosophy of *esprit de corps* will give robust help, but the histosophical study of other small signifiers related to that large tension – for example sacrifice, conscientious objectors, self-help, group feeling, or social network – might allow for a clearer and deeper picture of what is at stake in the modern We/I dialectic from a transnational perspective.

3. An example: *esprit de corps*

By way of demonstrating the possibilities of histosophy, we have chosen the notion of *esprit de corps*. As we progress through the different stages of the analysis, the histosophical approach helps us to understand the notion itself, the development of the notion, and its relation to other ideas.

According to the Oxford English dictionary, ‘*esprit de corps*’ is a ‘phraseological combination’ that designates ‘the regard entertained by the members of a body for the honour and interests of the body as a whole, and of each other as belonging to it.’²⁶ The American Merriam-Webster dictionary proposes both a ‘simple’ and a ‘full’ definition of *esprit de corps*. The ‘simple’ one is: ‘Feelings of loyalty, enthusiasm, and devotion to a group

among people who are members of the group.’²⁷ Their ‘full’ definition is: ‘The common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of a group’.²⁸ Common spirit, regard, feelings, loyalty, devotion, enthusiasm: a philosopher’s unifying perspective could decide that this all equates to an attachment to group unity. This question is studied today in analytic philosophy departments under the following labels: ‘shared intention’,²⁹ ‘joint action’,³⁰ ‘the plural subject’,³¹ ‘collective intentionality’,³² ‘team agency’,³³ etc. Some definitions of esprit de corps speak of the honour of the group as if a social body, as a whole, could be personified.

A definition is never enough from a historical perspective, because definitions are neither universal nor sustainable over time. We need to remember that the biography of group feeling, for example, is not devoid of ideological and historical resonances, as well as epochal shifts. In an article entitled ‘The Doctrine of Fascism’, for example, Benito Mussolini wrote in 1932 that the State was both a living organism and the ‘highest and most powerful form of personality.’³⁴ In the nineteenth century, Hegel’s influential *Philosophy of Right* referred to the State as a superior universal spirit.³⁵ The consequence of such views is that discrete individuals – citizens or simple inhabitants – might be considered to be second-rate persons compared to the super-individual that is the state or the organised group:

The very existence of individual citizens becomes tied into the ends of the group organism. They have no independent lives outside the group. Their very liberty must be defined in terms of the group. [When] the group becomes an end in itself [...], a corollary of this is that human units could become means to an end.³⁶

Esprit de corps can be analysed in terms of its opposition to individual liberties. The notion was often articulated in opposition to individualism. For example, the first academic paper dedicated to the phenomenon of esprit de corps, published in August 1899 in the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, subscribed to the Enlightenment’s general suspicion towards biased and selfish collectives, accused of oppressing the individual:

In our opinion, esprit de corps is a collective egoism, solely concerned with collective ends, and disdainful of the individual and of individual qualities. [*L’esprit de corps est, selon nous, un égoïsme collectif, uniquement préoccupé des fins collectives, et dédaigneux de l’individu et des qualités individuelles.*]³⁷

These contradictions remind us that socio-political ideas gain from being historicised and located contextually rather than universally defined: this might seem obvious for intellectual historians but in other dominant fields of academia naïve universalist approaches regarding human nature are still common place. An analytic examination of an ideological or political notion seems impossible if it is undertaken without historicising. Because there is no clear definition of what esprit de corps is, for example, and no agreement on the possibility for a collective body to manifest its own consciousness or spirit, a historical approach to esprit de corps would look – throughout a long period of time – at the uses that have been made of ‘esprit de corps’, in what historical, social, discursive, and rhetorical contexts, within which webs of belief. A fixed signifier, with its rich and floating semantic field, is particularly interesting for the history of ideas if it is transcultural or transdiscursive (used in several social milieus and normative discourses), transnational

(used in several languages and geopolitical zones), and transtemporal (used across centuries). Because different meanings are given to 'esprit de corps', for example, with laudative or negative valences, it seems possible to study comparatively what social strategies or historically relevant speech acts are at stake behind the utterances of the phrase.

So how did we proceed in detail to conduct a histosophical approach on 'esprit de corps'?³⁸ We primarily focused on texts that contained explicitly the signifier 'esprit de corps', prior to considering related terms in the same semantic field ('groupthink', 'team spirit' or 'corporatism'). This does not mean that we neglect the latter ideas, but we did prefer to encounter them formulated in contexts where 'esprit de corps' was also mentioned, instead of assuming *a priori* that they were related.

Instruments of data retrieval are many, today. To dig into French texts, we did use for example the Frantext database.³⁹ The ARTFL implementation of the database (formerly the *Trésor de la Langue Française*) 'consists of over 2900 texts, ranging from classic works of French literature to various kinds of non-fiction prose and technical writing. The eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries are about equally represented.'⁴⁰ In English as in French, we can also use century-specific databases, as well as other digital archives like Gallica (from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France),⁴¹ the Internet Archive for English books (mostly UK and USA),⁴² online journal databases (like JSTOR and Project Muse), or online archives of journalistic publications. In this illustrative article, however, we wish to focus on the search tool known as the N-Gram Viewer, directly connected to Google Books.⁴³

In 2011 a group of researchers connected with the Harvard Cultural Observatory published an article in *Science* to propose a tool that was meant to extend the boundaries of word- or phrase-searching to corpora of 'millions of books' in several languages, a data source produced by Google's effort to digitise a plethora of books in the last decade.⁴⁴ In their terminology, a 1-gram is either a word or a punctuation mark. 'Esprit de corps', for example, is a 3-gram. The automatic search engine presents occurrences of the required grams in print, chronologically, within a time range that can be adapted manually. It is then generally possible to explore the content of each book and read the neighbouring pages in which the phrase 'esprit de corps' is used in order to understand the context of use. It is also often possible to read the entire book online, but less so in the twentieth century than in the eighteenth century, for copyright reasons.

The type of result that the N-Gram viewer retrieves depends on the chronological range chosen. For example, it is possible to search between 1895 and 1899 in French or English documents, but it is also possible to choose long-term scales. The succession of texts is generally chronological, but not without a relative disorder and sometimes dating mistakes that must be rearranged by human analysis. As of October 2015, the number of book titles in several so-called dominant languages scanned by Google Books was 25 million, while their estimate of all book titles ever published was above 130 million.⁴⁵ Since Google intends to scan an increasing number of books, we can suppose that our analysis might be different if conducted ten and twenty years from now. How different? Is there sufficient volume today to conduct a relevant and robust differential analysis? We believe so.

These raw figures give us a sense of the scale of our concept and of its development over time. It is useful now to dive into the many thousands of search results in order to explore the meanings of esprit de corps at a more granular level. At the time this research was

conducted, the three first Google Books results for the search term ‘esprit de corps’ between the randomly chosen period of 1838–1847 give an idea of the diversity of documents that we can encounter. Let us look for example at a random retrieved result, the *Compte rendu des débats du Grand Conseil du canton de Vaud sur le projet de loi ecclésiastique* (1839), which contains two occurrences of ‘esprit de corps’, the first one being the following:

I did not mention anyone in particular; I only referred to esprit de corps in general. Now, it is in the nature of things and of men that every corporation which deals only with an object seeks to seize it exclusively; it is the propension [*esprit*] of bodies [*corps*] to extend their attributions, their power. [...] It can be said that as soon as a young man has completed his theological studies, he becomes part of a powerful corporation, which, more than any other, possesses an important leverage, the power it exerts over consciences, a weapon stronger than the civil power. Everywhere the priests’ corps have had a tendency to rise above the civil authority and to dominate. This is the story of all times. [...] I have, I repeat, no intention to refer to anyone in particular. I merely recall a historical fact. Nature is in the nineteenth century as it has been everywhere, in the Middle Ages and in all ages.⁴⁶

Here the work of the robotic search engine stops and a human exegesis is much needed. We need to look beyond a particular enunciation of ‘esprit de corps’ in order to understand who the author of the text is, in which context the speech act was uttered, what rhetorical strategy was deployed, and to what other synchronic and diachronic uses it is related. The above example is a generalising consideration on esprit de corps, presented as a universal natural law of human groups and human nature: whether individuals in the group like it or not, a specialised society or corporation will tend to form a monopoly and expand at the expense of the outside world.

We can ask: who is affirming this and according to what rhetorical strategy? The title of the document gives us a clue via the word *ecclésiastique*, and so does its location, a Swiss region under strong French historical influence. Further research reveals the existence of a debate in Switzerland, at that time, regarding the separation of Church and State.⁴⁷ The author was a Doctor of Law, the *président du Conseil d’État* Emmanuel de la Harpe (1782–1842), brother of a former officer of the Napoleonic army.⁴⁸ This excerpt unfolds as a defence of the balance between the power of the state and the power of the Church. It is a secularist claim for the protection of citizens from an excessive religious authority. It is probable that the author wished in fact to defend the primary power of the state, since he did represent the public administration, but he carefully presented himself with the rhetorical mask of an impartial philosopher. The esprit de corps of the church is diplomatically presented as dangerous not because it is evil, but because it is hegemonic by nature, as all forms of organised power: the rhetorical strategy is to assert that this is not a case of *argumentum ad hominem* against such or such representative of the Church, not even against the power of the Church, but a moderate and benevolent exposition of a universal human law that calls for an agentic form of equilibrium. Any power must be controlled by counter-powers, because the esprit de corps of societies tends to be a conquering force. Religious societies in particular could then be overly influential because of their power over conscience – today this would be perhaps recategorized as a debate on ‘cultural engineering’.⁴⁹

De la Harpe’s argumentation was to a certain extent a pastiche of the Enlightenment discourse in the style of the *Encyclopédie*. The Encyclopédistes, chief among them

Diderot and d'Alembert, accelerated the use of the notion of *esprit de corps* against religious groups. They succeeded in undermining the strong religious and educational power of the Jesuits, while the latter tried to defend themselves by presenting a eulogy of 'esprit de corps'. In other words, as proposed by historian Ian Hunter regarding the term 'secularization', notions like *esprit de corps* could be called 'combat concepts', or polemical notions used as weapons by different 'cultural-political factions.'⁵⁰ A critic could argue that, by suggesting that human history is the history of combat notions used by antagonistic groups – and of the concrete consequences of such arguments –, we are being as generalising and universalising as Emmanuel de la Harpe. But we need to distinguish between history and human nature. Even if history demonstrates that agonism has been universal and central until now, nothing authorises us to posit that a conflictual will to hegemony will forever be the essence of human or group relations, even if common sense or experience suggests this is likely.

Much more could be said to analyse our prototypical *Canton de Vaud* example. Even such a brief example gives us an insight into the potential power of a histosophical approach. By having access to hundreds of texts between the early eighteenth century and today in which a chosen signifier can be easily spotted in context, we are able to operate a horizontal, comparative, and diachronic analysis of the uses of the notion in the hope to form a general meaningful narrative. The limitations of such a long-term search is that it cannot perform simultaneously, a more vertical and localised form of history, an orthodox intellectual history approach that would look in detail at the precise context and micro-history of each utterance. We could spend one month or even one year trying to understand the history of the relationship between the Church and the State in Switzerland in the 1830s, and it would certainly be fascinating and valuable history. There are probably different levels of understanding of Emmanuel de la Harpe's speech act, and we have only scratched the surface of this particular use of 'esprit de corps'.

However, histosophy is trying something more structural and long-term (even if it is not ultimately exclusive of short-term exhaustive micro-histories, to be performed incrementally by other researchers or by further research). We are aware that the vertical or synchronic study of a particular use of an idea in a particular geo-cultural context and short period of time is valid orthodox intellectual history. But if the purpose is to understand the general evolution of a notion that is part of a socio-political modern problem, we need alternative methodological tools. For example, a comparative and differential look at the uses of 'esprit de corps' in the long term, across nations and historical periods, can unveil typologies, structures or patterns that will shed some light into related concepts of group agency, social cohesion, individualism, collectivism, groupthink and underlying concepts.

We believe the approach can be used for any number of other notions or objects in modern history, for example, as mentioned earlier, 'laissez-faire'. Another example of a small signifier that has been the subject of recent historical research is use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon'. As in the case of *esprit de corps*, big data text scanning was used to identify meanings and changes over time, for example in France in the last 150 years. The results showed that, despite significant variations in emphasis, the core connotations of the Anglo-Saxon remained relatively stable.⁵¹ Moreover, it quickly became clear that, in addition to the intrinsic value of such research for the history of French political

culture, the Anglo-Saxon signifier was a revealing entry point into other larger concepts such as ‘capitalism’ and ‘nation’. If we were now to apply a comprehensive histosophical approach to the term Anglo-Saxon, we would be able to explore these related concepts in more detail. And we would have a more robust, less speculative, foundation from which to build an analysis.

4. Conclusion. Agonism as the ontology of history?

Above and beyond the history of specific concepts, a histosophical approach raises fundamental questions. In particular, the focus on big ideas and big concepts brings us back to an issue that has been difficult to discuss since the advent of ‘postmodernism’ as a label, namely the importance (or otherwise) of grand narratives and over-arching stories about the development of ideas or civilisations. Should we definitively give up on the possibility of a pertinent synthetic capturing of an epochal truth, or should we seek to unveil something like a non-simplistic meta-narrative encompassing different webs of belief across regions and times? The latter would have the benefit of avoiding a complete historical relativism in which the general human evolution would be ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’.⁵²

It is possible that the method of histosophical genealogy can reveal something, not only about specific concepts and their genealogies, but also about the ideological structure of modernity. In a time of mass politics, digital populism and global conflict of worldviews, we should not abandon the philosophical desire to reconstruct order and meaning on the sound and fury of history. Even if the authors of this article recognise the difficulties inherent in such a task, they hope that histosophy can make a contribution to the re-emergence of solid large-issue and anticipatory history, without which one might surrender under the constant bombarding of disparate discourses, antagonistic ideologies and accelerated techno-social changes. By carefully tackling such large-issue history through small concepts or well-defined material objects, we will gain a clearer understanding of more substantial concepts that resist singular explanations and protect ourselves and others from the noise of simplistic claims about human nature or human history.

Notes

1. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, 5.
2. *Ibid.*, 78.
3. Armitage and Guldi, *The History Manifesto*, 4.
4. Osrecki, “Constructing Epochs,” 131–46.
5. Gallie, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” 167–98.
6. David Walker, “Book review of Emmanuel Reynaud, *Holy Virility*,” 121.
7. Levinson, *The Box*.
8. de Miranda, *Being and Neanness*.
9. Whatmore, *What is Intellectual History?*, 9.
10. Fouillée, *L’Évolutionisme des Idées-Forces*.
11. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.
12. Mercier and Sperber, “Why Do Humans Reason?,” 57–111. See also, in a rather different context, Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*.
13. Skinner, “Rhetoric and Conceptual Change”, 136–37. Originally published in *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*.

14. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," 82.
15. Pocock, *Political Thought and History*, viii and 70.
16. Book on Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*.
17. Armitage, "What's the Big Idea?," 493–507.
18. Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences sociales," 725–53.
19. Armitage, "What's the Big Idea?," 493–507.
20. Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Harari, *Sapiens*.
21. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.
22. Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books," 176–82.
23. Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*.
24. Armitage, "What's the Big Idea?," 507.
25. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," 167–98.
26. 'Esprit de corps, n.' OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>.
27. 'Esprit De Corps.' Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.
28. 'Esprit De Corps.' Merriam-Webster Dictionary.
29. Alonso, "Shared Intention, Reliance, and Interpersonal Obligations," 444–75.
30. Baltzer, "Joint Action of Large Groups," 1–18.
31. de Bruin, "We and The Plural Subject," 235–59.
32. Searle, "Collective Intentions and Actions," 401–16.
33. Gold and Sugden, "Collective Intentions and Team Agency," 109–37.
34. Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 164–68.
35. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 208.
36. Vincent, "Can Groups be Persons?," 690.
37. Palante, "'L'Esprit de Corps,'" 135–45 (141).
38. de Miranda, *The Transnational Genealogy of Esprit de Corps*.
39. The ARTFL-Frantext Project, <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/artfl-frantext>.
40. Ibid., <https://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/node/83>.
41. BNF Gallica, <http://gallica.bnf.fr>.
42. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org>.
43. The N-Gram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.
44. Michel et al., "Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books," 176–82.
45. Google Books Search, <http://blog.google/products/search>.
46. 'Je n'ai parlé de personne en particulier; je n'ai fait allusion qu'à l'esprit de corps en général. Or, il est dans la nature des choses et des hommes que chaque corporation qui ne s'occupe que d'un objet cherche à s'en emparer exclusivement; il est dans l'esprit des corps d'étendre leurs attributions, leur pouvoir. [...] On peut dire que dès l'instant qu'un jeune homme a achevé ses études théologiques, il fait partie d'une corporation puissante, qui plus qu'aucune autre a un levier immense, le pouvoir qu'il exerce sur les consciences; arme plus forte que le pouvoir civil. Partout les corps de prêtres ont eu une tendance à s'élever au-dessus de l'autorité civile et à dominer. C'est l'histoire de tous les temps.' 'M. de la Harpe, président du Conseil d'État', in *Compte rendu des débats du Grand Conseil du canton de Vaud sur le projet de loi ecclésiastique, ou recueil des discours qui ont été prononcés* (Lausanne: Dépôt Bibliographique, 1839), p. 147.
47. Maclear, ed., *Church and State in the Modern Age*, 229.
48. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse, <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch>.
49. Maruyama, "Cultural Engineering Toward Mental Health," 282–92.
50. Hunter, "Secularization," 1–32 (1)
51. Chabal, "The rise of the Anglo-Saxon," 24–46.
52. Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.

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