

# History as « retrospective prediction »?

## On the limits of predicting the future by learning from the past

*Prof. Dr. Andreas Fickers / Megatrends 2050 - shaping the future with scientific foresight*

*Chambre de Députés May 4<sup>th</sup> 2023*

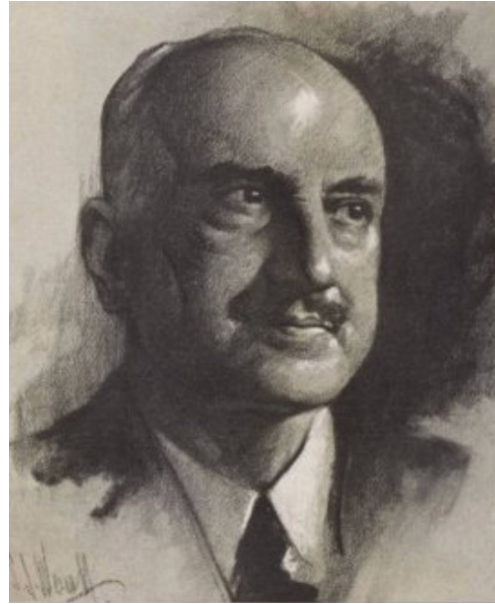


# historia magistra vitae?

**zdf** info

**„ Wer die Vergangenheit nicht kennt,  
kann die Gegenwart nicht verstehen  
und die Zukunft nicht gestalten.**

historia  
magistra  
vitae?



Those who  
do not  
remember  
the past are  
condemned  
to repeat it.

- George Santayana

Niccolo Machiavelli



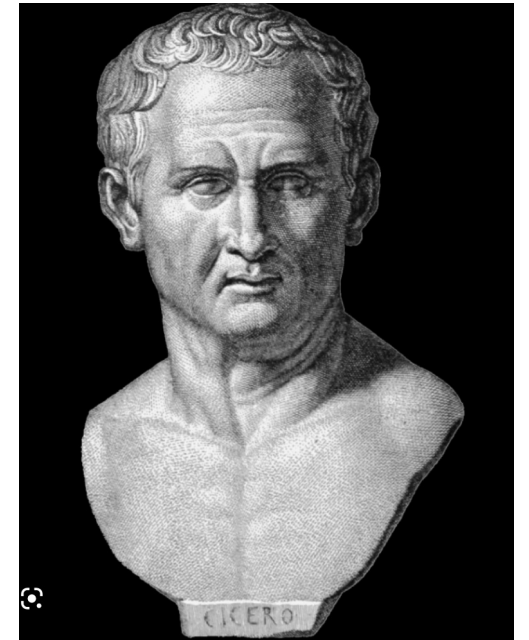
Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been, and ever shall be, animated by the same passions, and thus they necessarily have the same results.

AZ QUOTES

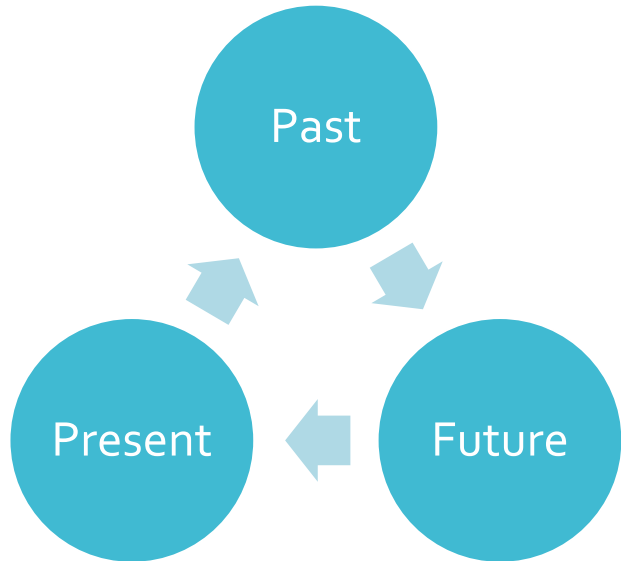
Historia magistra vitae?

historia  
magistra  
vitae?

HISTORIA  
MAGISTRA  
VITAE  
ET TESTIS  
TEMPORUM



## Mingled Temporalities:



- “Die Gegenwart ist schwanger mit der dem Kommenden; die Zukunft ließ sich in der Vergangenheit lesen; das Ferne wird im Nahen ausgedrückt”.
  - Gotfried Wilhelm Leibniz
- “Who controls the past, controls the future. Who controls the present, controls the past”.
  - George Orwell

# Modernity as new temporal regime

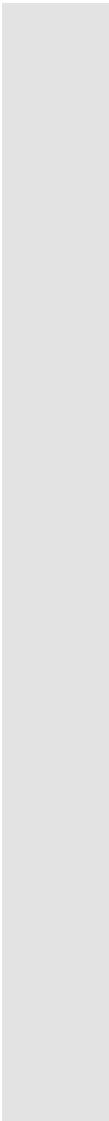
Reinhart Koselleck  
(1923-2006)

- Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (“Sattelzeit”), especially with the French Revolution, the past no longer serves as a “model” for the future.
- A new temporal regime emerged: the future became “open”, plannable, shapable; History with big H, not histories!
- Modernity is based on idea of “progress”; horizon of expectation is a projection of present knowledge / ideas, not of past “lessons”.



Theodor  
Mommsen  
(1817-1903)

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- “History is no longer a teacher of the art of political prescription but is instructive solely in that it inspires and instructs independent creative judgement”.
  - Römische Geschichte, Berlin 1882, Bd. 3, S. 477.
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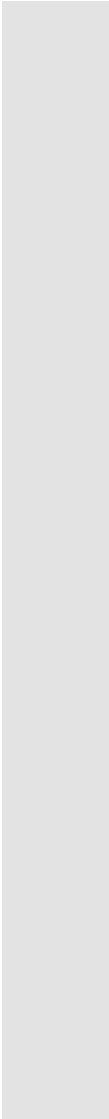
History is  
about  
understanding  
the past  
*as open process*

- Since emergence of “École des Annales” (1920s), historians try to understand past changes by combining analysis of “longue durée” trends and “singular historical events”.
- Thinking historical change as complex interplay of structures (economic, political, social, cultural), long term processes (climate, geological, demographic, mobility etc.), and singular events makes the “art” of historical interpretation & argumentation.



## History never repeats itself

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- Historians have tried to build “models” or “ideal-typical” representations of past processes, but they don’t serve “formal” or “prescriptive” purposes but are heuristic tools; they cannot serve as instructions for future action.
  - History as historical science has the virtue of being an “orientation science” for understanding the present but fails as prognostic instrument.
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Limited  
predictability

is not

successful  
forecasting

- “The structures of human societies, their processes and mechanisms of reproduction, change and transformation are such as to restrict the number of things that can happen, determine some of the things that will happen, and make it possible to assign greater or lesser probabilities to much of the rest. This implies a certain (admittedly limited) range of predictability—but, as we all know, this is by no means the same as successful forecasting.”

- Eric Hobsbawm, *Looking Forward: History and the Future*, in: *New Leftist Review* (1/125Jan/Feb 1981).

“Vergnügen  
retrospektiver  
Besserwisserei”

Joachim Radkau

- Instead of making predictions, historians should study past futures!
- First of all, because they show the limited half life and a high rate of falsification.
- Second, because wrong prognoses of the past remind us about the “surprise effect” of history!

“Einstige Fehlprognosen nicht wegzuwischen, sondern in Erinnerung zu rufen, öffnet historische Einsichten eigener Art, nicht zuletzt über die Bedeutung des Überraschungseffektes der Geschichte”.

“Die realhistorische Bedeutung früherer Zukunftserwartungen kann ebendarin bestehen, dass diese den Überraschungseffekt realer Kontingenzen, unvorhergesehener Verknotungen diverser Ereignisketten verstärken”.

JOACHIM RADKAU

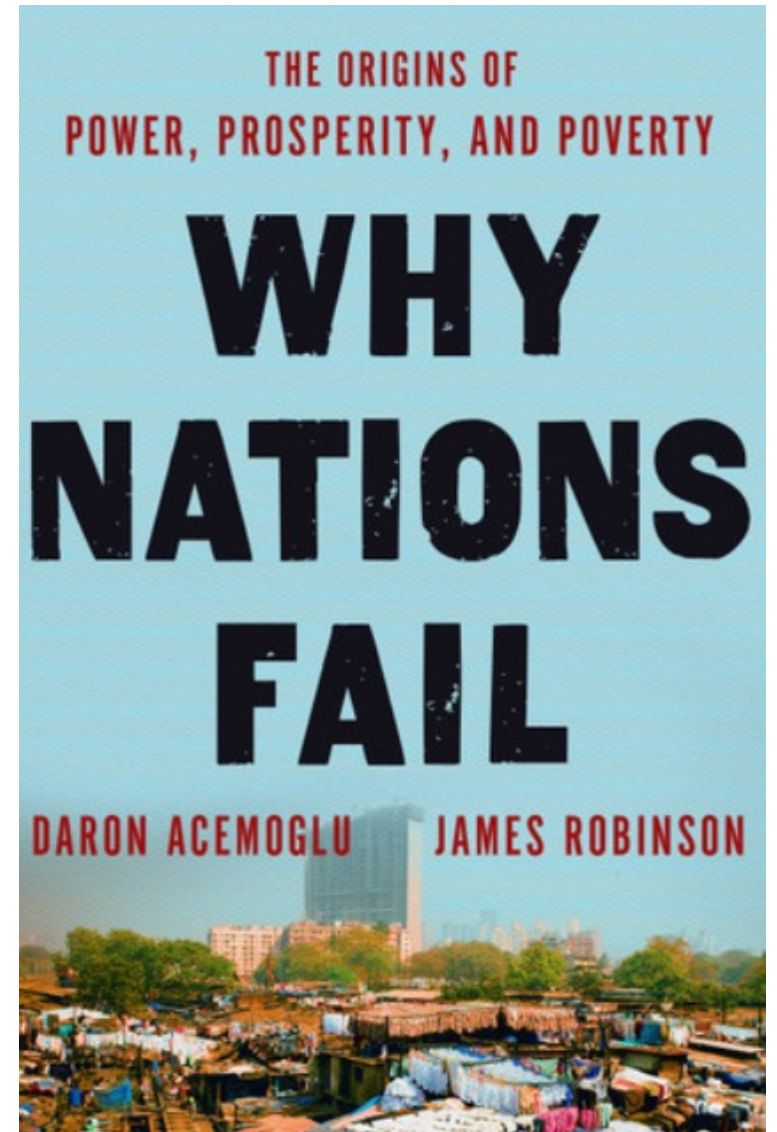
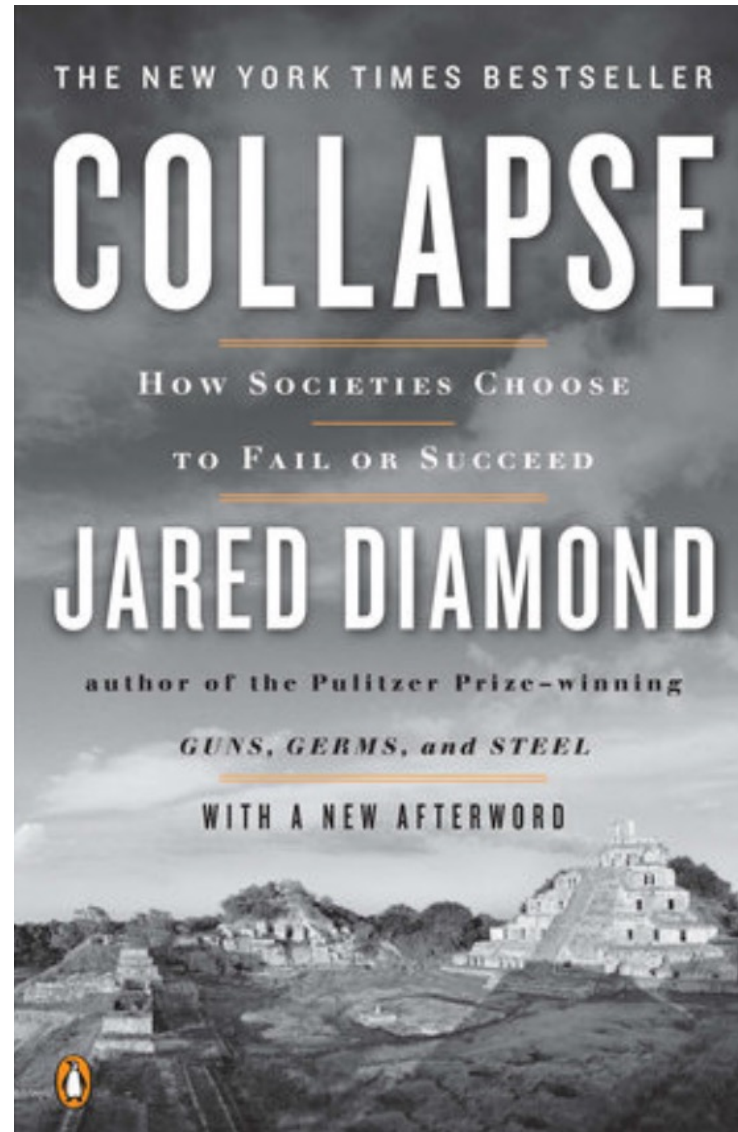
# GESCHICHTE DER ZUKUNFT

Prognosen,  
Visionen, Irrungen  
in Deutschland  
von 1945 bis heute



Despite  
professional  
warnings:

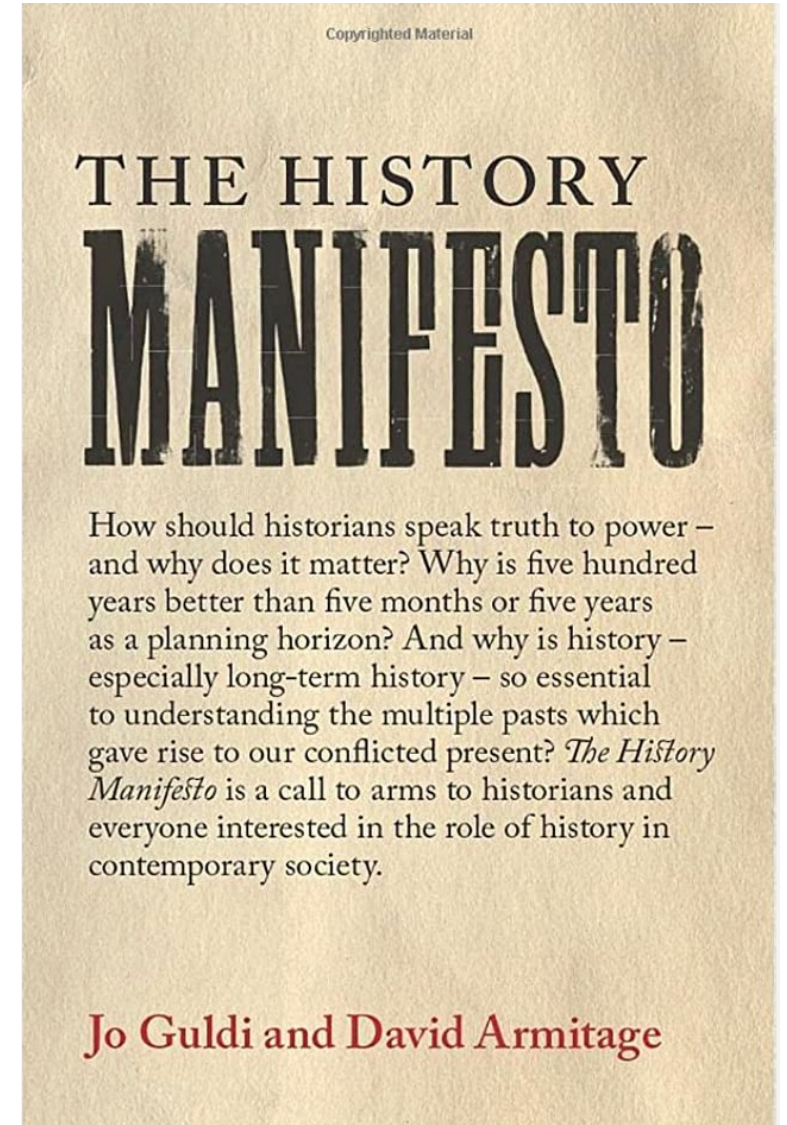
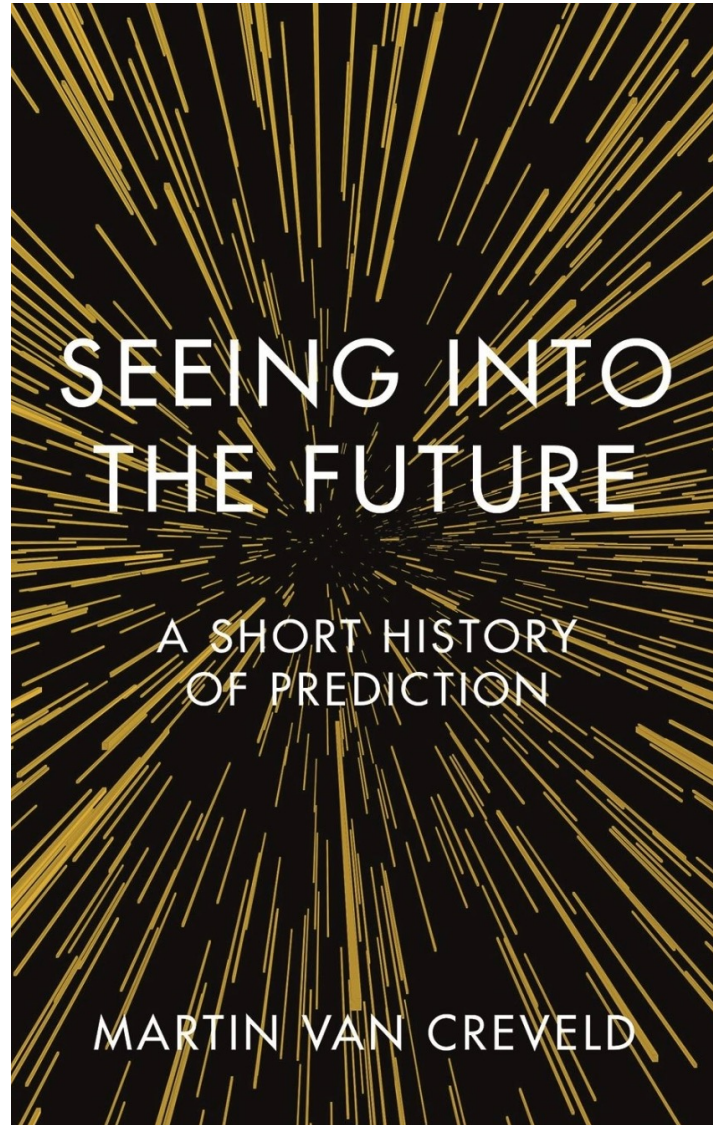
retrospective  
prospection  
is popular!





Despite  
professional  
warnings:

retrospective  
prospection  
is popular!



(Digital)  
History  
in the age of  
big data  
of the past

- Techno-scientific imaginary of our age is driven by belief that ever more data about the past, their treatment with machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence software will produce “more accurate”, “more scientific” predictions than those produced by older systems of divination.
- “But the assumptions underpinning the algorithms that forecast criminal activity, or identify potential customer disloyalty, often reflect the expectations of their coders in much the same way as earlier methods of prediction did.”
  - Amanda Rees, **The History of Predicting the Future**  
<https://www.wired.com/story/history-predicting-future/>



“The search for universal principles or patterns might be of interest for philosophers, natural scientists or computational linguists, but makes no sense for historians who share a basic belief in the radical historicity (and therefore necessarily changeability) of all human nature and culture. If content or rather data is king in digital humanities, context is the crown – at least for digital historians.”



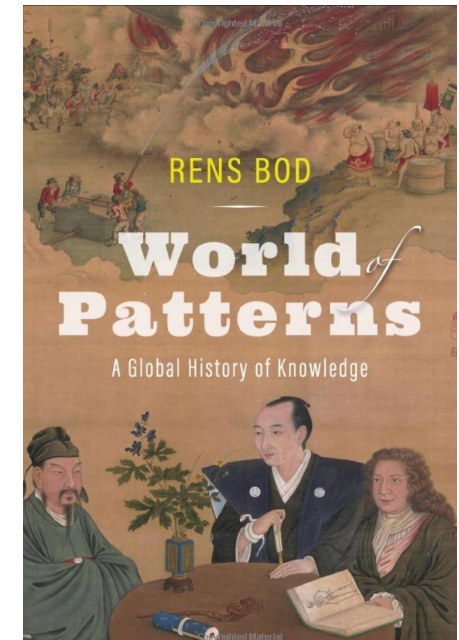
## Veins filled with the Diluted Sap of Rationality

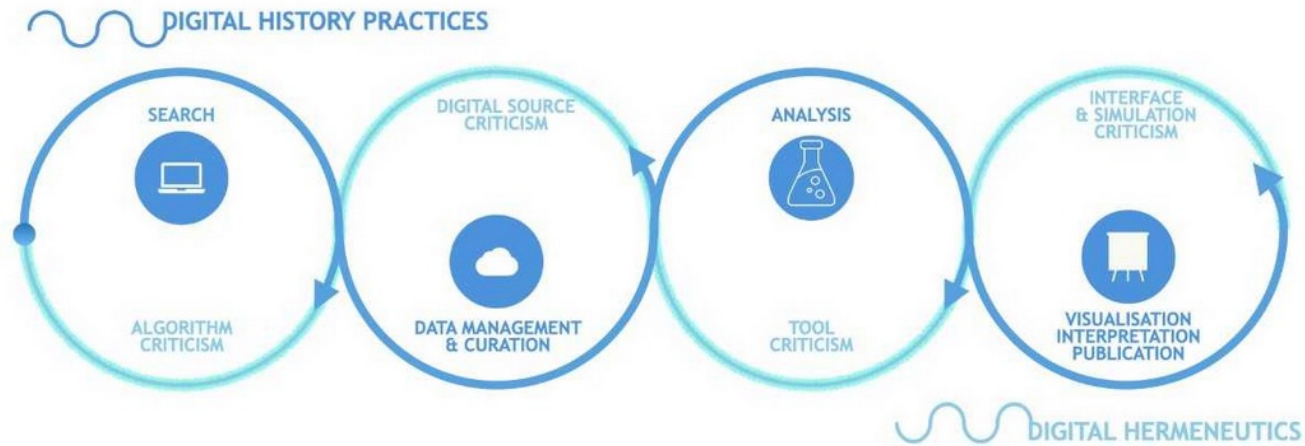
A Critical Reply to Rens Bod

ANDREAS FICKERS

155

This article argues – in contradiction to the thesis developed by Rens Bod – that the hermeneutic tradition of humanities is not obsolete, especially when trying to understand the opportunities and challenges of using digital technologies for future research. The practice of digital history will have to be based on the critical analysis of the creation, enrichment, editing and retrieval of digital data as much as on the application of classical source criticism and historical contextualisation. If 'content' or rather 'data' is king in digital humanities, as imagined by Bod, context is its crown – at least for digital historians.





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## For a critical data literacy

Predictions about the future will fail as in the past; statistical correlations are no historical causalities

But: we can learn from past failures instead in believing in the rhetoric of scientific forecast

We need to train the next generation of scholars (in all disciplines) in digital hermeneutics

Learning the cultural technique of “scalable reading” will take a generation (2050)