German historians have an industry they call ‘Periodisierung’, and they take it very seriously. It is not unknown to English scholars but they, with typical Anglo-Saxon levity, treat it with less reverence, for they look upon it as a recreation rather than as a science, and when they engage in it they do not consider they are on oath. They are right: periodisation, this splitting up of Time into neatly balanced divisions is, after all, a very arbitrary proceeding and should not be looked upon as permanent. The utility of such dividing lines comes from their experimental and tentative nature, for if they are accepted as easily removable signposts along the road of Time periodisation itself becomes an agent of criticism by forcing historians to vindicate their own selections of dates, thereby providing a powerful stimulus to new ideas. The vitality of historical writing derives strength from constant revisions caused by the discoveries of research, and very often some suggestions inspired by periodisation provide a new approach.

(Williams 1967:1)

C.H. Williams was certainly right with this statement. However, considering the unavoidable necessity of periodization for historians, it still needs a complement. If we define scholarship in the most elementary way as the production of verifiable statements, we include the obligation to reflect upon and to verify statements about historical periods, because almost every product of historical scholarship includes a statement on periodization, at least implicitly. Even the most pragmatic and rather arbitrary selection of two years to identify a portion of history could result in the smuggling of some theoretical concept into apparently factual statements. Quite often, perhaps, historians may not even notice what they are doing. The choice of 1485 and 1603 as limits of a book on English history may be an absolutely harmless conventional decision, but it could still further the controversial conception that such things as a special ‘Tudor regime’ or a particular kind of ‘Tudor Parliament’ or a genuine ‘Tudor style’ in building existed. And if this were not the case, at least the assumption is conveyed that crown and dynasty are the factors which really matter in history. Thus a simple concept of a period
in history is always a reduced kind of theory of history. And it is very well known now that historical research and historiography by necessity always include theory. A historian who claims to work without theoretical concepts simply introduces theory subconsciously or under cover, sometimes with rather dubious results.

On the other hand, periodization in the tradition of individualizing historiography has become superfluous as a result of history’s turn to structuralism. The idea of a historical epoch such as ‘The Early Modern Period of European History, 1494–1789’ is no longer in full vogue. We no longer believe in periods with clear-cut temporal limits as totalities or historical individual phenomena of a higher order. From that point of view, the debate on periodization appears outdated. However, communication among scholars cannot do without some reasonable subdivision of history. And in addition, the organization of the art is based on such subdivisions. Journals specialize in our period (Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, Sixteenth Century Journal, Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, Journal of Early Modern History) and academic positions are defined accordingly (cf. Newsletter: Historians of Early Modern Europe). What has died intellectually is very much alive socially! Like most scientific concepts, a historical period such as the early modern one also has a remarkable social dimension. After all, the idea of early modern history is based upon the expansion and growing differentiation of the historical profession. Therefore, the application of ‘Parkinson’s Law’ to the profession provokes the question, whether chairs of early modern history are established because of the existence of early modern history, or whether early modern history has to exist for the sake of the respective academic chairs.

Historical periodization is necessary, as has been demonstrated, but nevertheless historical periods should be considered as purely artificial constructs. This is not to say that they are creations of complete arbitrariness. Proposed periodizations will only be accepted by scholars and by the general educated public under certain conditions. First, they have to correspond to the state of the academic debate concerning the respective period. The revision of an established concept of periodization is only possible when a critical mass of new knowledge has been accumulated. This was demonstrated by experience, when Heinz Schilling and the author tried to introduce the concept of ‘confessionalization’ to revise the periodization of early modern German and European history (Schilling 1988; Reinhard 1989). Second, besides these strictly academic preconditions, acceptance of new concepts is based upon several other preconditions, much more than just the interest of a pressure group of historians.

One essential is that the proposed periodization conforms with the predominating ideology, especially with a consistent idea of national history. European or world history is still not written by Europeans, but by Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, etc. from their national points of view.¹ Probably, the respective national ideas of history provide an explanation of the different weight the problem of

¹ Perhaps inter-European collaboration on the ESF project ‘The origin of the modern state, 12th–18th c.’ will change this.
periodization has in different countries. Apparently, historians from nations with a broken political tradition are more inclined to reflect upon periodization than others whose national identity has never been put to the test. Therefore, the most elaborate arguments in favour of a particular ‘Early Modern History’ have been produced by Germans, who almost lost their historical identity after 1945. This connection becomes evident from the parallel case of the ‘Early Bourgeois Revolution’ (‘Frühbürgerliche Revolution’), a concept created by historians of the former German Democratic Republic for the period 1476–1535 in German history. It was meant as an instrument to replace a broken national tradition by a new and better one. Consequently, it disappeared silently when the German Democratic Republic broke down (cf. Steinmetz 1985). But this case is exceptional only because of its undisguised character. It is just an open manifestation of a latent general principle which is at work everywhere.

By a kind of silent general European agreement, also accepted by many historians from outside Europe, the coincidence of certain steps towards the modern national state in England, France and Spain with the culmination of the Renaissance in many European countries, with the great discoveries and with the Protestant Reformation in Germany is considered to be the beginning of a new period of history (Hauser 1963; Skalweit 1982). Sometimes this ‘early modern Europe’ is to include only the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but as a rule its end in the French Revolution is held to be even more self-evident than its beginnings. Historians from all countries use this concept without much reflection. With some remarkable exceptions (Hassinger 1959) historiography has made no active contribution to the development of the concept of ‘early modern history’. Debates, if there were any, occurred on a metahistorical level. Therefore, as examples have shown, a complete review of historiography would not be worth while for our purpose.

The terms ‘early modern history’, ‘frühe Neuzeit’, ‘historia moderna’, ‘histoire moderne’, ‘storia moderna’ almost never appear as entries in dictionaries and encyclopaedias. I think ‘Frühneuzeit’ was used for the first time explicitly in German, when the philosopher Wilhelm Kamlah in 1957 tried to establish an epoch of that name (Kamlah). His starting-point is the contemporary reflection about our age, which is characterized by anxiety because of the continuous and rapid change in the world. But if our age is the object of our anxiety, its existence cannot be denied, and the question as to whether historical periods exist at all has to be answered in the affirmative, at least for the ‘modern period’ (‘Neuzeit’) we live in. The ancient Greeks and Romans did not know that they lived in ‘Antiquity’; ‘Antiquity’ as a historical period is the product of Renaissance humanism. Modern man, however, knows that he is living in ‘modern times’ (‘neue Zeit’). But in a sense the same is true of medieval man too, who of course did not know that he

2 Cf. the original limitations and the progressive extension of the ‘cohort’ of historians covered by the HEME Newsletter.
lived in the Middle Ages according to modern periodization, but who knew very well that he lived in the middle period of grace between the first and the second coming of Christ. This is the time which is counted by our Christian chronology BC and AD up to the present day. Therefore, in our Western world there are at least two ages, constituted as historical periods by their knowledge of themselves: the Middle Ages and the modern period (‘Neuzeit’). Traditionally, they are considered historical individualities, separated from each other by the Protestant Reformation. However, according to their salvational self-definition the Middle Ages would still have continued, had not the modern period (‘Neuzeit’) constituted itself as new in contrast to them.

But the Protestant Reformation as a dividing line between the ages appears questionable, because it never considered itself ‘new’ and its view of the future was very ‘medieval’, consisting of the expectation of ‘dear doomsday’ (Martin Luther) very soon. Innovation was always non-intentional in those days and disguised as a return to good old times. Modern self-consciousness began with Descartes in 1637, increased in the ‘querelle des anciens et des modernes’, and succeeded finally in the Enlightenment. Descartes’s intentions went far beyond those of the humanists and of Martin Luther. He no longer wanted to renew anything, but desired instead to start from zero by laying the foundations of a new methodical science, which by technological and medical application would create a new age of welfare for humanity (Kamlah 1957:325). The pathos of modernity is also the pathos of progress. This radical innovation went far beyond a new start in philosophy because of its coincidence with the rise of empirical science. Kepler, Galileo, Huygens and other scientists are at least as important as Descartes, because it was this alliance of philosophy and science that initiated that permanent change which became our fate up to the present day (ibid. 327). And the modernity of the ‘modern period’ consists in nothing else but the consistent acceptance of this change.3

In the beginning, however, acceptance was far from general, but rather exceptional. Galileo was condemned, and Descartes and Grotius were afraid of a similar fate. The new age became hidden behind the conservatism of that period, until the great breakthrough of the eighteenth century. But it was prepared and to a certain extent anticipated by humanism and the Renaissance, a fact which suggests the use of the term ‘early modern period’ (‘Frühneuzeit’) (Kamlah 1957:327) In contrast to the Enlightenment the Renaissance founded its remarkable enthusiasm for innovation upon the idea of a return to antiquity, an antiquity which had been identified as such for the first time. With Descartes, however, innovation became autonomous and self-sufficient. But already in the Renaissance Leonardo da Vinci and Nicolò Machiavelli represented that will to power which became essential for modern self-consciousness, as modernity consists in the progressive overpowering of the world by science and technology (ibid. 330). Therefore, the ‘early modern

3 Probably about the same time, during the English Revolution, political discourse dropped legitimation by precedent for the first time and referred to innovation according to reason instead, cf. Hill 1967:178.
period’ (‘Frühneuzeit’) is not an age in the same sense as the Middle Ages and the ‘modern period’ (‘Neuzeit’) itself, but rather a transitory phase, and a historical period of its own only as far as its own acceptance of innovation goes. Obviously, Kamlah thinks that Descartes marks the transition from the early modern to the modern period, but his own argument leads to the conclusion that an extension of the early modern period until the breakthrough of modern self-consciousness in the Enlightenment is more reasonable. A comparative analysis of periodizations has demonstrated that it is more useful to begin a new historical period when some characteristic innovation has become predominant, and not at the time of its first appearance (van der Pot 1951:19–34). In 1969 Kamlah published a revised version of his essay, in which he dropped the term ‘early modern period’ (‘Frühneuzeit’) tacitly (Kamlah 1969). By this time, however, it had already become popular with German historians.

Some years later, Reinhart Koselleck produced similar results from a different point of view. His main interest was the change of German social and political consciousness in the late eighteenth century. For this purpose he developed the instrument of ‘Begriffsgeschichte’, whereby the use of important historical notions is analysed carefully from the synchronic and the diachronic perspective, e.g. the change in meaning of the German term ‘Bürger’ from the member of an urban corporation in about 1700 to the citizen of a state in about 1800 to the bourgeois non-proletarian in about 1900 (Koselleck 1979:116). The notions of a new time (‘neue Zeit’) and modern history (‘neuere Geschichte’) made their way slowly but successfully from about 1500 to the eighteenth century. The abbreviation ‘Neuzeit’, however, did not appear before the nineteenth century. And, we should add, the term ‘Frühneuzeit’ not before the twentieth. But the eighteenth century knew that mankind had lived in a new time for three centuries (Koselleck 1977:277), centuries which had been different from the Middle Ages and antiquity, which both had become the objects of a detached and critical historical approach (Koselleck 1979:540). Nevertheless, the notion of ‘new time’ (‘neue Zeit’) as a rule still did not include the historical experience of continuous innovation and the expectation of permanent progress in the future (Koselleck 1977:276).

Therefore, the new term ‘contemporary period’ (‘neueste Zeit’), which appeared in the late Enlightenment and became popular during the French Revolution, was quickly accepted to express the experience of rapid historical change. In spite of his theoretical reserve against periodization Leopold von Ranke used to lecture, on ‘contemporary history’ (‘Geschichte der neuesten Zeit’ or ‘neueste Geschichte’), beginning either with Frederick II of Prussia or with the American or French Revolution (ibid. 269, 278). Only then did the specific consciousness of modernity of the period (‘Neuzeit’) reach its culmination. 4 The creation of ‘contemporary history’ (‘neueste Geschichte’) should be considered the most mature stage of

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4 The creation of a revolutionary calendar starting with a new era was certainly the most radical expression of this new consciousness of modernity.
‘modern history’ (‘Neuzeit’), a maturity expressed in Koselleck’s very German formula of ‘temporalization of history’ (‘Verzeitlichung der Geschichte’). From now on, time is considered not only the pattern of history, but a driving force in it. Consequently, after 1780 it became possible to use the noun ‘history’ (‘Geschichte’) as a collective singular designating history in the abstract, whereas before that time ‘history’ had always been in need of an object or a subject. In detail, ‘temporalization’ means first of all ‘acceleration’ (‘Beschleunigung’) of history. From now on, new experiences follow each other in shorter and shorter intervals. Instead of producing a series of events of the same quality the future is no longer predictable. As a consequence, the present tends to become a time of permanent transition. The basic uniqueness of unpredictable events promotes sensitivity to the uncontemporaneity of the contemporaneous—the perspectivism of historicism is not far away (ibid., passim). All this becomes evident towards the end of the eighteenth century, but ‘temporalization of history’ developed during the three centuries of the ‘so-called early modern period’, leading to ‘that particular kind of acceleration which is typical of our age’ (Koselleck 1979:19).

In 1990 Johannes Burkhardt used these suggestions to define the ‘early modern period’ and at the same time tried to fill this theoretical framework with real historical content (Burkhardt 1990). He is well aware of concepts which consider the period between 1500 and 1800 as a mere secondary subdivision of a much longer era. Nevertheless, he accepts the ‘decisive turn to modernity’ about 1800 as self-evident and believes that about 1500 another important step in the same direction occurred. But he introduces Elizabeth Eisenstein’s argument in favour of the years around 1500. According to her, the well-known sudden success of printing all over Europe was of central importance for the further course of history, comparable only to the first invention of writing and the alphabet in its consequences for communication and the accumulation of knowledge. Martin Luther knew very well that the printing revolution was a necessary condition for the success of his Reformation. The spread of literacy for religious reasons meant better education of the people, but also facilitated the establishment and rule of bureaucratic government, with the creation of new kinds of sources for historians as a consequence.

The ‘early modern period’ is defined as a transitional age when the structures of the medieval way of life were still alive, whereas at the same time developments were on their way which would lead to the present state of things. However, old and new cannot be separated neatly. On the contrary, it is exactly their mutual interpenetration which characterizes the ‘early modern period’ (‘Frühe Neuzeit’) as that part of our modern age (‘Neuzeit’) which still disavowed its modernity (ibid. 365). Norms and legitimation were grounded on the idea of a stable world and therefore claimed permanent validity. Innovations were rarely accepted; to prove innovation meant to discredit a case. Special strategies had to be developed to master that change which had become unavoidable. They all resemble each other, because they always try to fit things into an immutable order.

In this sense humanism and Renaissance, in spite of their innovatory elements, were possible only as an imagined return to a classic age after a period of decadence. Revolutionary movements always claimed to return to some old order which had become perverted by innovation. Certainly, the German peasants’ war went beyond that point.
with its programme of ‘divine law’ (‘göttliches Recht’), but this divine law was based on an evangelical movement which intended a return to the pure doctrine of original Christianity. The religious impulses of the sixteenth century had confessionalization as their consequence, activities with conservative intentions but far-reaching unintended consequences. With very similar instruments Lutherans, Calvinists and Catholics tried to ‘Christianize’ Europe, but from the viewpoint of their respective confessions. The great European witch craze of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fits well into this context as another transitory phenomenon. Once, one used to live with magic; later, after the Enlightenment, one did not take it seriously any longer. But now, under the pressure of thorough Christianization, one should get rid of it, but is still under its sway emotionally and therefore tends to panic. But the attractive plurality of Europe’s cultural landscape is also a product of the plurality of ‘confessionalizers’.

But the largest gains from confessionalization went to the modern state. As a rule, churches needed state help with their programme of Christianization. In return, states gained new powers, additional resources and ideological legitimation, all of which gave them a push towards their own institutionalization. A particularly important case is the institutionalization of war, when several forms of more or less legitimate use of violence were reduced to the state monopoly in that field, culminating in the creation of the ‘miles perpetuus’, the standing army, during the seventeenth century. In domestic politics the new tendency towards a general levelling down of the subjects, creating an equality not so much of rights as of their loss, was in conflict with the traditional hierarchical order of the society of estates. In England, Poland and other countries the outcome was an institutionalized participation of the higher estates in state power. Elsewhere, the minimum solution was a legal fixation of social hierarchies and a reinforcement of the predominant position of the nobility via their new cultural role in court society. Thus discipline imposed from above by church and state corresponded to self-imposed discipline from below when European elites were civilizing themselves (cf. Elias 1976), with the result that the gap between elite culture and popular culture widened.

The greater part of the European economy retained its feudal and agrarian character. Within this traditional framework, however, the new forces of a market economy were at work. Agrarian surplus production for the market initiated social change, with the dissolution of feudalism in England and the creation of a new serfdom east of the Elbe as the extreme cases. The growing rural population was employed in out-work, especially textiles, to such an extent that sometimes the countryside was changed by this trade in the sense of a ‘proto-industrialization’ (cf. Mendels 1972; Kriedte 1980:96). Greater demand, last but not least from princes waging war, led to the growth of the mining and arms industries. An expansion of commerce was the consequence of this development and of the great discoveries. New forms of monetary transaction became necessary, once again with the states’ demand for credit in the lead. In addition, states started a kind of economic policy to increase their revenue. But all these innovations remained under the sway of a static conception of the economy. The amount of resources available was considered a constant figure; the idea of economic growth did not yet exist.
Fundamental change only occurred in the eighteenth century, when according to Koselleck the ‘temporalization of history’ took place. Now the otherness of the past and the openness of the future were discovered. The present became a mere instant of a process of development, which was cheerfully accepted and used to legitimate further innovations.

Certainly this latest description of early modern Europe is largely correct. But does it really constitute a historical period of its own with exact temporal limitations? Apparently Burkhardt had to work under such an assumption, given by his editor. This special need to establish an independent early modern history, however, is not only the consequence of institutional development where early modern history has become an academic subject of equal rank with others. It may also have to do with the state of mind of leading German historians after the Second World War. The catastrophic end of the national power-state in Germany in 1945 produced a shift of attention to the historic world of the Old Empire, which despite or perhaps because of its political weakness allegedly had preserved peace and order for several centuries (e.g. Angermeier 1984; Dickmann 1959; 1971).

In other European countries the historiographical situation was completely different. ‘Storia moderna’ in Italy and ‘Histoire moderne’ in France by origin were defined as what was left over when medieval history had become a profession of its own and when in the late nineteenth century ‘Storia contemporanea’ and ‘Histoire contemporaine’ had originated, both as a result of political change, when national unity had been achieved in Italy, and when the ‘party’ of the French Revolution had finally come to power in the French Third Republic. The periodization of this almost residual (early) modern history was until recently characterized by a similar lack of imagination. In France and Britain, in Spain and Portugal it was subdivided mainly according to dynasties or even rulers, if they lived long enough. Even if intended as an instrument of mechanical chronology this procedure showed a tendency to create periodological concepts. Perhaps the ‘century of Louis XIV introduced by Voltaire into historiography did really exist, perhaps it is reasonable to speak of the ‘Spain of the Catholic kings’. But doubts are permitted concerning the France of Louis XV or the Spain of Philip IV.

5 Cf. Barbagallo 1988; Soldani 1978. I am obliged to Ilaria Porciani (Florence) and Pierangelo Schiera (Trento) for these references.
7 e.g. Lavisse 1901–11; Clark 1934–81; Pidal 1976–. I received additional information from Gerald Aylmer (Oxford), and several students of my seminar on ‘Die Frühneuzeit als Epoche’ at Freiburg University in winter 1990/1.
The conventional subdivision of Portuguese history by the years of dynastic change (1385, 1580, 1640, 1816/20) was challenged as early as 1842. The state of society and the development of institutions was proposed as a criterion instead of dynastic events. In our day Vitorino Magalhaes Godinho drew upon Portugal’s position in the world economy and accordingly established subdivisions in the middle of the fifteenth century, when the country reacted to overseas expansion, at the crisis of 1545–50, and at the recovery around 1670–80. The most recent general history of Portugal attempts a compromise using as key dates 1415, 1495, 1580, 1640, 1750 (Godinho 1968; Valerio 1988; Serrao 1977– ).

To periodize Italian history before 1870 by rulers was simply not possible. In addition, humanism and the Renaissance allowed no break about 1500. They started to grow in the fourteenth century, flourished in the fifteenth and still included the sixteenth (Ferguson 1948; Hall et al. 1979). Nobody has ever tried to establish the beginning of the Italian wars in 1494 as an essential watershed in Italian history.

Obviously, different countries for very good reasons use different criteria of periodization. It was the mere coincidence of political progress in western Europe and the German Reformation which created the idea of a general threshold about 1500. But it is difficult to make Portugal fit into this framework, and in the case of Italy it is impossible. In addition, different areas of history, such as politics, religion, culture and the economy, have their own rhythm of development and therefore, as a rule, their own adequate temporal subdivisions. Consequently, historiography has not been able to prove that a consistent early modern period was beginning about 1500 everywhere in Europe.

On the contrary, structuralist historians have for long claimed that certain significant patterns of the so-called early modern period, such as an agrarian economy with static mentality, a hierarchy of estates, a political order based on personal relations, a predominance of Christianity, had been present long before 1500. Not only historians with a certain affinity to the Nazi view of history such as Otto Laufer (1936) or Otto Brunner (1958), but also the German émigré Dietrich Gerhard (1955–6; 1962) and a prominent member of the Annales group such as Jacques Le Goff (1983) spoke of ‘Old Europe’ or the ‘Long Middle Ages’. Finally in 1974 the Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung was founded, designated to combine late medieval and early modern studies. Its editors distinguished three periods of post-ancient history, an ‘Archaic Age’ up to the eleventh or twelfth century, an ‘Old European Age’ from the twelfth to the early nineteenth century, an ‘Industrial Age’ from then to the present time (Kunisch et al. 1974). Others make different proposals, e.g. Dietrich Gerhard goes back to the eighth century (Gerhard 1981). Sometimes the debate seems to return to that Italian tradition where ‘Storia moderna’ included everything after the end of the Roman Empire. In short, the replacement of ‘early modern’ by ‘Old European’ failed to produce a more distinguishable temporal borderline between historical periods!

8 Barbagallo 1988:567. Somehow this tradition has been revived by the Storia d’Italia published by Einaudi (Turin), where vol. II (1974) is called Dalla caduta dell’impero romano al secolo XVIII.
But from the point of view of structural history this is unavoidable, because the beginning and the end of different structures almost never coincide in time. A historical period in the sense of structuralist history could be defined by the simultaneous presence of certain fundamental patterns, which begin and end at different times. Nevertheless, we do not know if an interconnection between parallel structures exists and how it works. Therefore, for a structuralist historian, the problem of the totality of a historical period, of an epoch being a historical individuality of a higher order, is either a premature, or perhaps even the wrong question. It corresponds too much to the ideology of historicism, but not at all to that of structuralism. (cf. Pomian 1978).

The irreversible change of structures should be called ‘revolution’, in contrast to structurally determined historical events or reversible cycles, such as demographic crises or trade cycles. An application of this strict definition of ‘revolution’ to the French Revolution, this allegedly self-evident end of everything which characterizes early modern history, leads to the dissolution of this borderline, too. A structural change occurred only in the fields of political, legal and perhaps intellectual history, whereas the economy and society remained very much the same. And even in culture and politics much continuity down to the nineteenth or even twentieth centuries has been identified by historical research inside and outside France. Today, a strong minority of French historians is quite willing to extend their ‘Histoire moderne’ to 1830 or even later. The change of consciousness identified by Koselleck is but a part of the picture. And it is closely connected with the self-interpretation of the French Revolution as a radical new start in history. Therefore, in accepting the French Revolution as a clear division of historical periods, historians follow the sources as they ought to, but in doing so they accept the propagandistic self-image of the revolutionaries.

This leads us back to Kamlah’s argument. Innovative self-definition has been identified as the essential characteristic of modernity. Therefore, modernity culminates in the French Revolution, although this claim to modernity does not so much describe real historical change, but rather the mental process of creating a self-image based on the ‘temporalization of history’ and the consequent expectation of continuous progress in the future. Such self-definition of an age, and thinking of ages in general, however, are based on a monist concept of the totality of a historical period. In this sense, the ‘temporalization of history’ has been the necessary precondition of the creation of historical individualities of a higher order. But recent postmodern philosophy has demonstrated how obsolete modern unitary thinking has become in the meantime. From this point of view, the will to unitary solutions and notions appears as the characteristic intellectual habit of the ‘modern period’ (‘Neuzeit’), but at the same time also as the typical illusion of this ‘modern period’. Today this unitary approach is no longer possible and not even desirable (Welsch).

10 I am obliged to Robert Descimon, Paris, for information on the relevant opinion poll among French historians.
Therefore, the ‘modern period’ was the only age that ever existed, because it thought of itself and created itself as a historical period. And there will never be another age again, because thinking of ages has come to an end together with the modernity of the ‘modern period’.

Under such circumstances our ‘Idea of an early modern history’ becomes a paradox, because it has been exposed as part of a disintegrating illusion at a time when ‘early modern history’ as a profession has reached the culmination of its expansion. Perhaps our argument is wrong, because what is so powerful simply cannot be illusory. But I should rather prefer a different solution. I should like to consider ‘early modern history’ (‘Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit’) merely as a pragmatic specialization of scholars inside the historical profession, based on certain traditions of the art on the one hand, and on the necessity to deal with specific sources, communication processes and institutions of that time on the other.

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