



# Book Review: *Key Metaphors for History. Mirrors of Time* by Javier Fernández-Sebastián, Routledge, 2024, 338 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-35446-3

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## BOOK REVIEW

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PRESS

Javier Fernández-Sebastián's *Key Metaphors for History. Mirrors of Time* fits historically and historiographically into a precise place: between Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology and the analysis (derived from there) of the word-concept 'Truth', on the one hand, and Reinhart Koselleck's reflection on history and the word-concept 'History', on the other hand. It could be added that this location takes inspiration from Gadamerian hermeneutics and from the awareness that the intellectual world is permeated by language. From this vantage point, Fernández-Sebastián's analysis amazingly enlarges to explore the different paths covered by the concepts and metaphors used in and for history, especially in the last two centuries, picking up the thread of the historiographical discussion woven in recent years with works such as *Metafóricas Espacio-Temporales para la Historia. Enfoques Teóricos e Historiográficos* (edited with Faustino Oncina Coves in 2021), *Tiempos de la Historia, Tiempos del Derecho* (edited with Javier Tajadura in 2021), and, especially, his important monograph *Historia Conceptual en el Atlántico Ibérico. Lenguajes, Tiempos, Revoluciones* (2021). I want to say right away that Fernández-Sebastián's greatest achievement in writing this book is to be found in his ability to present the discourse on metaphors for history as an in-depth analysis of the main methodological and theoretical questions that have emerged over the last 50 years in the study of history.

But let us proceed in order, starting from the definition of the concept of metaphor, from the possible use that historians can make of it, and from the very distinction between concept and metaphor. As recalled by Fernández-Sebastián, the term metaphor derives from the Greek; simply stated, it can be said that metaphor 'seeks to explain something in terms of something else, to comprehend the unknown in terms of the known' (6). Everyone can easily realize that this definition of metaphor exactly defines the work performed by the historian. Following this line of reasoning, comparing the definition of metaphor with the work performed by the historian, read the subsequent statement: 'Normally based on an analogy that gives rise to a transit of properties and attributes between two situations, objects, or states of things, the

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## KEYWORDS:

Metaphors; Conceptual History; Historical Method

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Alonzi, Luigi. 2024. "Book Review: *Key Metaphors for History. Mirrors of Time* by Javier Fernández-Sebastián, Routledge, 2024, 338 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-35446-3." *Redecriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(2): 235–241. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.463>

metaphor would be the main strategy available to man in order to ‘semantically colonise’ the unknown, that is, to attempt to access the unfamiliar and render it familiar’ (6). It is clear that we are navigating around some of the most debated issues on the theory of history that emerged in the last years. Add that ‘this leads us to peer into the abyss of the preconceptual in our quest to explain by means of a theory of nonconceptuality (*Unbegrifflichkeit*) (Blumenberg 1997) how the emergence of some explosive metaphors makes it possible for the unthinkable and ungraspable suddenly begin to seem conceivable (Palti 2011)’ (6).

This definition of metaphor makes us aware of the importance of metaphors, not only on the historiographical level but also on the theoretical and cognitive level. Indeed, metaphors are no less important than concepts, so much so that ‘in many contexts the two – metaphors and concepts – are barely distinguishable. Numerous worn-out metaphors are lexicalized as concepts and consequently used as living metaphors in a new context [...] Not only is there an abundance of intermediate states of crystallization [...] but one can never be certain that such and such a concept will continue to be employed for much time in a literal sense without someone deciding, at any given moment, to once again lend it a figurative twist and vice versa’ (3). This conceptualization pushed Paul Ricoeur (1983–1985) to suggest that ‘history performs a kind of metaphorization of past events, which are represented, and in a way recreated, by means of narratives that inevitably present them in a different light to that which illuminated them when they actually have occurred’ (10). Within this conceptual framework, we can ask ourselves what the subject of Fernández-Sebastián’s book really is. In the first instance, it is a survey and an analysis of the different approaches and attempts to conceptualize history–past-time performed by historians, men of letters, journalists, philosophers, intellectuals, politicians, and scientists; in other words, it is a reconstruction of how people tried to understand the emergence, birth and/or discovery of this new subject of knowledge (History with capital H).

This process of knowledge—argues Javier Fernández-Sebastián (and I completely agree with him)—cannot be understood without the use and the study of concepts and metaphors, and the various combinations/crystallizations of them. Keeping in mind the initial comparison between the definition of metaphor and the work performed by historians, we can ask ourselves what sources and resources people have in their availability to interpret the past and to explain it. Of course, they could simply reproduce the texts and try to re-propose the objects of the past as they really were. This aspiration, which had long prevailed in the nineteenth century, has more and more fallen under the blows of historical criticism in the twentieth century. Historians have become increasingly aware that reality is constructed by language and that to understand reality one must necessarily pass through language. This evidently also applies to historical reality and to History as a subject of study (we leave aside, here, if History can actually be considered an autonomous subject of analysis). This awareness has led historians more sensitive to theory to reconstruct the process through which the very concept of History came to light and became the subject of a science, historiography. Thus, history and historiography have inevitably passed through one of the fundamental modes of functioning of thought, which, to try to better define its object and to try to explain it, makes use of analogies, similarities, resemblances; in a word, it resorts to or creates metaphors.

From this perspective, we can note that metaphors are among the most intriguing and important means to put historical events and historiographical reconstructions in their context and continually keep in lively tension the relationship between continuity

and discontinuity. In the words of Fernández-Sebastián, 'the uses of a metaphor are always selective and may involve misalignments, thus establishing a variable balance in terms of benefits and costs in cognitive terms. One might say, therefore, that the genealogy and evolution of the concept of history are not very different from the history of the metaphors employed to speak about it' (22). For example, by considering history as a train, as a railroad, or as a station, nineteenth-century people and historians drew on conceptual resources that had just become available to them and applied them metaphorically to understanding the past. Clearly, thinking of history and the past as a master or teacher of life, as a mirror or as a train, opens the way to a whole series of different approaches to history and different relationships with the past. Javier Fernández-Sebastián has not conducted a broad survey of the metaphors related to the study of history but has concentrated on some of them (certainly the most representative) providing us with a book that offers an inspiring and in-depth analysis of the main historical and historiographical metaphors and, at the same time, proposes one of the most fascinating explorations on the theory of history achieved in recent years.

The book is organized into two large blocks. The first block (Part I: Conceptual metaphors for history) is concerned with History and addresses the most important metaphors used to describe History. It is divided into three chapters, respectively entitled 'Metaphorizing History', 'Time and Memory', 'Pasts, presents, and futures'. The second block (Part II) is devoted to 'Metaphorical concepts in historiography' and is in turn divided into three chapters entitled 'Sources, events, processes', 'Revolution, crisis, modernity', and 'Progress, decline, transition'. The book ends with some rich 'Final thoughts' that emphasize the contribution that the study of metaphors can give to the reflections on the theory of history carried out in recent years. As I have already pointed out, I believe that one of the greatest merits of Javier Fernández-Sebastián's book consists precisely of the skilled intertwining between analysis of metaphors and reflections on theory and historical method. Obviously, it is not possible to follow the book in all its facets, so I will limit myself here to recall some of the passages that show the value of this intertwining between metaphors and the theory of history.

After having reviewed the fundamental metaphors applied to the concept of History in over two millennia and focusing, in particular, on the nineteenth century, when history was identified in all its potential and came close to becoming the *Regina Scientiarum*, Javier Fernández-Sebastián dedicates the last part of the first chapter to the counter-metaphors and metaphors then used to indicate the crisis of history during the twentieth century. The protagonist of the paragraph on counter-metaphors could only be Friedrich Nietzsche. The young professor from the University of Basel, presented 'a panoply of arguments and alternative metaphors for history and its modes. [He] turned some fundamental metaphors around and battled against others. He directly attacked the quasi-religious conception, between theological and teleological, of history and criticized the absurd idea of making it a supreme court, as advocated by various illustrious philosophers [...] He countered the metaphors of the mirror – so consistent with the Rankean desire to show 'how things actually were' – with those of interpretation and perspective [...] Nietzsche brutally redescribed the old Ciceronian adage according to which history was the master of life, relegating it to being life's servant [...] from *magistra vitae* to *ancilla vitae* [...] In his opinion, vital spontaneity, in a way unhistorical or suprahistorical, should take over from history and place the latter at its service' (45–46).

In so doing, the analysis of metaphors becomes the history of historiography and, at the same time, a critical theory of history. Indeed, Fernández-Sebastián continues arguing that ‘in recent decades, the growth of the politics of memory has displaced history from that hegemonic position to the extent that Hartog (2013) wrote that Mnemosyne, the mother of muses, has usurped the position of her daughter Clio [...] Via a very different route to that of Nietzsche, more than a century after his celebrated essay [*On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1873)], we see how History has been returned to an ancillary position, although on this occasion it has had to serve Memory, rather than subordinating itself to life, as the German philosopher had desired’ (47). As is well known, the two world wars contributed greatly to changing the image and conception of History and this change could not fail to have repercussions on the use of metaphors. History was no longer the judge of human events but now sat in the dock. ‘This forceful expulsion of Clio from the bench to the dock – from judge to judged – has profound implications for my subject – says Fernández-Sebastián – particularly in view of the fact that, after the creation of the International Criminal Court, the gesture of Nuremberg and Tokio has since been repeated on several occasions [...] One of the pioneers of this ethical and cultural inversion during the inter-war period was Walter Benjamin (2007). All his ambiguities notwithstanding, Benjamin merits consideration, along with Nietzsche, as the other great destroyer of metaphors and prolific creator of counter-metaphors’ (48–49).

In addition to dismantling the railway metaphor of revolution, Benjamin also emphasised that ‘Ranke’s conception of history as the mirror of the past is basically erroneous. The past is not a ‘fixed point’ to be found in ‘what has been’: it is more like a collective dream from which it is necessary to awaken in order to free oneself from it [...] In the end, Benjamin had subverted the metaphorical foundations of both conventional historiography and the philosophies of history: the past does not resemble a mirror but a dream; revolution, more than a locomotive, should be conceived of as an emergency brake; progress, far from being a joyful march towards the future, is a destructive storm’ (49–50). These arguments are accompanied by a 1916 cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt ordering Lady History to erase the names of the objectors to war from the book containing ‘the RECORD of the PAST’, which she kept under her protective arm; to this order Roosevelt received a curt ‘Fool’ in response.

The use of images is another important element that contributes to giving value to Fernández-Sebastián’s book. Among others we can also mention here the cartoon by Andrés Rábago published in *El País* in 2021, depicting a man digging to unearth skeletons under the writing (in Spanish): ‘Let’s us finish the historical memory business as soon as possible and start to imagine the future’ (86). This image is part of the ‘war of memories’, and it is an occasion for Fernández-Sebastián to deepen the discourse on history and memory and to prepare the ground for the following chapter on ‘pasts, presents, and futures’. In line with the theoretical debates of recent years, this book by Javier Fernández-Sebastián is a profound reflection on the condition of man with respect to the past, the present and the future, in their plural form, a complex condition that has pushed historians to broaden their horizons, to delimit/overcome the borders/boundaries of their own discipline, to attempt interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches. These concerns are condensed in the ‘Final thoughts’ that close the book, where Fernández-Sebastián acutely considers the impact of metaphors on the conceptions and perceptions of history present in the last

years, all the more so since very often metaphors are used without an awareness of their presence and function. As an example, the well-known passage from the 'history of ideas' to the 'conceptual history' can be understood through the function of the metaphors of 'influence' and 'reception.' Equally, an important function was played by the metaphors of 'discovery' and 'birth.'

Furthermore, the crucial function of metaphors unfolds differently between the 'banal historicism' of ordinary people and the increasingly sophisticated theoretical tools used by professional historians. Evidently, the politicization of history and memory has a huge impact on the public sphere, where the large use of phrases such as 'lessons of history', 'learning from history', 'making history', 'right/wrong side of history', 'would indicate that there is a very stable tropological substrate in the historical imagination of ordinary people' (266). Beyond this, special importance is given to the metaphor of 'the past as a foreign country', which allows us to return to the discussion on pasts, presents, and futures with some concluding considerations. Historiographical presentism and recent currents that tend to overcome the difference between past, present, and future, seem prelude to the creation of a new intellectual and scientific space with blurred lines that threatens to make the metaphor of 'the past as foreign country' disappear, or at least to strongly question it. Furthermore, another presentist metaphor has come to the fore in the public sphere, that of 'heritage', which favors an instrumental use of the past; in this case, history would risk losing its autonomy as a possible object of study.

If I have dwelt on this question – argues Javier Fernández-Sebastián – it is because I am convinced that the serious threats to the metaphor of the past as a foreign country are one of the most eloquent symptoms that we are currently undergoing a critical phase of profound transformation of historical consciousness and that we do not know exactly where it will lead us. And if this last bulwark – I refer to the qualitative difference between the past and the present – were to fall, the discipline of history would probably have changed so much that it would cease to be an enterprise intellectually recognizable as history (268).

These words can summarize the value of Fernández-Sebastián's book, which is a profound and up-to-date reflection on the state of historiography and on the conception of history through the analysis of metaphors. Some recent cultural and scientific trends, expressed by metaphors such as 'Anthropocene' (certainly the predominant one), but also 'Acceleration' and 'Fragmentation', seem to crush the past under the weight of the present and the future, making history an increasingly difficult object to identify. What is at stake, along with history, is the conception of time as a unilinear or stratified process and the possibility of creating a consistent link between past, present, and future. In any case, all these metaphors come from different preoccupations and different visions of the world (not only the human world); Javier Fernández-Sebastián's goal is that of trying to make sense of the recent state of epistemological affairs through their analysis. For sure, all of them testify to a state of crisis/transition in historiography, which struggles between a fleeting or expanded present and a future that is sometimes too cumbersome (especially in its dystopian form) and other times elusive.

We cannot predict the future, but we can glimpse something. What is certain is that the new is always the fruit of the past (evidently, the metaphor of 'fruit' is very significant). In my view, the comparison between the definition of metaphor and the work performed by the historian is crucial to an understanding of their

intertwining and to be aware of the fundamental functioning of language and the process of knowledge. Furthermore, as argued by Fernández-Sebastián, ‘the economy of the metaphor is inseparable from history in all its forms [...] One might say that the regulatory metaphors employed in each era to refer to history or science are themselves second-degree metaphors of the existing cognitive culture or epistemological paradigm. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the same or similar change of metaphor proposed by Nietzsche for history, refuting Cicero – from master to servant –, was applied a century later to describe the precarious status of truth at the beginning of postmodernity: ‘Truth, far from being a solemn and sever master, is a docile and obedient servant’ (Goodman 1978)’ (54). To find similarities and differences is the fundamental modality through which humans appropriate the past and the world around them; this process of finding is construed through words, tropes, images, signs, and so on. Even the process of creation (of metaphors, words, images and historical discourses) needs to go through this process of research that links past, present and future, which is a process of continuous translation, transmission, and transformation. Nothing is created from nothing (perhaps this only happened at the beginning of Time).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Alonzi  
*Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*  
 DOI: 10.33134/rds.463

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Alonzi, Luigi. 2024. "Book Review: *Key Metaphors for History. Mirrors of Time* by Javier Fernández-Sebastián, Routledge, 2024, 338 pages. ISBN: 978-1-138-35446-3." *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory* 27(2):235–241. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.463>

**Submitted:** 16 August 2024

**Accepted:** 29 October 2024

**Published:** 04 December 2024

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