

7. THE THIRD FORCE REVISITED

Martin Mulsow

I Stimulations

I first met Dick Popkin in Leiden as one of the participants of his four-week seminar on the celebrated anti-religious tract *The Three Impostors* in 1990. I just had finished my doctoral dissertation on a Renaissance topic, and I had run out of money. I knew nothing about the three impostors, nor did I know anything about clandestine literature, but my teacher Eckhard Kessler, a member of Constance Blackwell's Foundation for Intellectual History, helped me secure this one-month stipend. So I traveled to Leiden and was looking forward to my month of paid education. These four weeks changed my life – if I may use this emphatic phrase. Initially, it was not even Dick's personality that made an impression on me. At that time he was simply a foreign professor to me, who was much better acquainted with most of the other participants. But when I was talking to Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, and others, I soon discovered that research on the liberal and radical fringe of the early German enlightenment was just beginning, if it even existed. Almost nothing was known about intellectuals and their debates in Germany at that time, not to mention the circulation of clandestine manuscripts and publications. The Leiden seminar was an intensive course on the Radical Enlightenment for me, and I would spend the next sixteen years clearing the ground in that particular area – a project I am still working on.¹

It was only in 1994 that I came in closer contact with Dick. I had found a Jewish anti-Christian manuscript, written in Portuguese, which circulated in Germany in the early years of the eighteenth century, and I told him about my find. Dick's way of answering my letters made a great impression on me. I had

¹My Leiden piece was "Freethinking in Early Eighteenth-Century Protestant Germany: Peter Friedrich Arpe and the 'Traité des trois Imposteurs'", in Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism and Free Thought in Eighteenth-Century Europe. Studies on the "Traité des trois Imposteurs"* (Dordrecht/London/Boston: Kluwer, 1996), pp. 193–239.

never before encountered such generosity and such a willingness to address my issues personally in such a detailed fashion. After Dick had pointed me to reference catalogues, I soon was able to identify the author of my manuscript, Moses Raphael d'Aguilar.² Thereafter, we stayed in close contact and debated topics ranging from Rittangel, Wachter and van Helmont to Socinians and Spinozists. In 1995 I read and reviewed the essay collection *The Third Force* with great enthusiasm, because it made me better understand the intellectual context of the Hartlib circle, which I had come across already.³ I traced the impact of Campanella's thought in this circle and focused especially on two friends and collaborators of Comenius, Georg Ritschel and Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld, who have been underestimated thus far.⁴ Viewing them as members of the Third Force opened up new perspectives to me. I did further research on Bisterfeld and had a closer look at a text that had been falsely attributed to him, the *Clavis apocalyptica* of 1651.⁵ This is how I arrived at the millenarian issues that fascinated Dick so much.

It was still in 1995 that I discovered, on a trip to Cracow, two letters that were written around 1710 by a Frenchman who was converted to Judaism in Amsterdam.⁶ Most fascinating was that these letters provided an account of the motives for his conversion: a skeptical crisis, triggered by the young man's reading of Descartes, which he overcame through the search for religious certainty in Judaism as the first and most "rational" religion. I informed Dick

²See Martin Mulsow, *Moderne aus dem Untergrund. Radikale Frühaufklärung in Deutschland 1680–1720* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002), Chapter 2: "Ambivalenzen der Gelehrsamkeit. Ein jüdisches antichristliches Manuskript und sein Weg durch die deutsche Frühaufklärung." I dedicated this book to Dick.

³See Martin Mulsow, "Libertinismus, Cartesianismus und historische Kritik. Neuere Forschungen zur Formation der Moderne um 1700", *Philosophische Rundschau* 42 (1995), pp. 297–314.; idem, "Die dritte Kraft im Denken. Wege der frühen Neuzeit zur Toleranz: Mit der Moderne sind sie durch die 'Arbeit am und' verbunden", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 Feb. 2000, p. N6.

⁴See my article "Sociabilitas. Zu einem Kontext der Campanella-Rezeption im 17. Jahrhundert", *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 1 (1995), pp. 205–232, and Martin Mulsow, "Metaphysikentwürfe im Comenius-Kreis 1640–1650. Eine Konstellationsskizze", in Martin Mulsow and Marcelo Stamm, eds., *Konstellationsforschung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), pp. 221–257.

⁵See "Who was the author of the 'Clavis apocalyptica' of 1651? Millenarianism and Prophecy between Silesian Mysticism and the Hartlib Circle", in John Ch. Laursen and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Millenarianism and Messianism in Early Modern European Culture: Continental Millenarians: Protestants, Catholics, Heretics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), pp. 57–75.

⁶See my "Cartesianism, Skepticism and Conversion to Judaism. The Case of Aaron d'Antan", in Martin Mulsow and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 123–182.

about it, and he was tantalized: “The story”, he wrote me, “definitely is what I secretly hoped was going on in many minds of the time.”⁷ It was Dick, then, who suggested that we edit a collection of case studies like mine.⁸

Presently – to end my brief personal introduction – I am trying to spread Dick’s thought in Germany. His two autobiographical articles are currently being translated into German and they will soon be published as a book.⁹ I am hoping that this might increase the German audience’s appetite for his *History of Scepticism*, which has been translated into so many languages, but not yet into German.

The variety of stimulations that Dick’s books and articles provide – and provided for me – makes it difficult to focus on one particular area of his legacy. I have decided to choose the issue of what he labelled “the Third Force” and would like to focus on four points. First, I would like to make some observations on the very notion of “Third Force”; then, I would like to stress the benefits as well as the problems that are encountered if the concept of the Third Force, which is very much centered on England, is applied to other countries – in my case, to central Europe and Germany. Third, I would like to address the problem of containment or delimitation: who belongs to the Third Force and who does not? Finally, I would like to try to connect research on the Third Force with what I call “constellation analysis.”

II Two Third Forces

While Richard Popkin was the Clark Professor from 1981 to 1982, he developed, in dialogue with the invited scholars at the Clark Library, the concept of the Third Force.¹⁰ It was – and James Force and others know this much better than I do – Sascha Talmor’s book on Glanvill that directed his attention to Henry More, who led him to Joseph Mede. Charles Webster’s book *The Great Instauration* was important for Popkin in his attempt to make intellectual sense of this group of thinkers, whose connectedness became more and more obvious to him. “Some of the group of thinkers whom I shall consider”, he wrote, “have been called ‘the spiritual brotherhood’ by Charles Webster. I am not sure this is the most appropriate name, since some of them were

⁷Richard H. Popkin to Martin Mulsow, letter of 15 May 1995.

⁸Martin Mulsow and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe* (footnote 6).

⁹Richard H. Popkin, *Mit allen Makeln. Erinnerungen eines Philosophiehistorikers* (Hamburg: Meiner, Forthcoming).

¹⁰See the autobiographical notes on this stay in the Introduction of Popkin, *The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 2f.; idem, “Warts and All”, in James Force and Richard Watson, eds., *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988).

not so spiritual or brotherly. For want of a better name, I have called them ‘the third force’. As we shall see, all of them tend to combine elements of empirical and rationalist thought with theosophic speculations and Millenarian interpretation of Scripture. All of these elements were used to overcome the sceptical challenge.”¹¹ This passage comes from an article written in 1982, which appeared as the title essay in his 1992 volume, *The Third Force*.

What I am interested here is, first of all, the catchword itself, the notion of the Third Force. It is, as Popkin himself noted, an empty phrase, used “for the want of a better name.” Its function was precisely to avoid overhasty associations with spiritualism and religious enthusiasm. Space should be left for Bible critics or religiously indifferent people. On the other hand, though, the Third Force received a quite clear definition: as the overcoming of scepticism by scholars and scientists through the belief in, or better, the methodologically founded knowledge of Biblical prophecies. As Christopher Hill already noted in 1972, these thinkers wanted above all scientific certainty: “It was in a *scientific* spirit that scholars approached Biblical prophecy. It was the job of mathematicians and chronologers, like Napier, Brightman, Mede, Ussher and Newton. Such men believed in the possibility of establishing a science of prophecy, just as Hobbes believed in the possibility of establishing a science of politics.”¹² What Hobbes and Descartes had achieved in their own way, namely to overcome skeptical questioning of all knowledge by an infallible method, the thinkers of the Third Force hoped to do as well. This linking of the group with the skeptical crisis seems to me the main feature in which Dick exceeds Webster’s and Turnbull’s analysis, and it allowed him at the same time to extend the analysis to an even larger group.¹³

However, thirty-three years before the publication of Popkin’s book, a book had appeared in German under the title, *The Third Force (Die dritte Kraft)*. Its author was Friedrich Heer, an Austrian intellectual historian.¹⁴

¹¹Richard H. Popkin, “The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought: Scepticism, Science and Millenarianism”, in idem, *The Third Force in Seventeenth Century Thought* (footnote 10), pp. 90–119; pp. 90f.

¹²Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radicalism During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 92.

¹³Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration. Science, Medicine and Reform 1626–1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975); George H. Turnbull, *Hartlib, Dury and Comenius. Gleanings from Hartlib’s Papers* (London: University Press of Liverpool, 1947).

¹⁴Friedrich Heer, *Die dritte Kraft. Der europäische Humanismus zwischen den Fronten des konfessionellen Zeitalters* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1959). On Heer, see Richard Faber ed., *Offener Humanismus zwischen den Fronten des Kalten Krieges. Über den Universalhistoriker, politischen Publizisten und religiösen Essayisten Friedrich Heer* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005); Richard Faber and Sigurd P. Scheichl, eds., *Die geistige Welt des Friedrich Heer* (Böhlau: Wien, 2006).

I was curious and asked Dick if he had taken his title from Heer's book, but he denied it: "I never read or heard of Friedrich Heer's book. The term may be something that is mentioned in Charles Webster's book."¹⁵ To be sure, Heer's book is not about millenarians and theologically interested scientists of the seventeenth century, but about a group of thinkers from a century earlier. His Third Force is located not between rationalists and empiricists, but between Protestants and Catholics. "The Third Force", Heer wrote, "was the struggle of European humanists and reformers between 1500 and 1550 to save Europe from the imminent splitting-up into the ghettos of the recent centuries, in church states, state churches and nation states."¹⁶ He wrote this on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, as a clear statement of a member of the Catholic Church in favor of a liberalization of Catholicism.

Hence there is certainly a big difference between this Austrian liberal Catholic, who rediscovered the irenic humanists, and the secular Jew Popkin, who rediscovered the millenarians and messianists of the seventeenth century. But still there are connections between Heer's Third Force and Popkin's. If we follow the extension of the irenic circles of a Castellio, Aconcio or Ochino to the time around 1600, we find cosmopolitan Socinians like Martin Ruar or Florian Crusius, liberal late humanists like Matthias Bernegger, or independent spiritualists and hermeticists like Raphael Egli. From there, it is easy to draw further lines to several members of the Hartlib-Comenius circle. The fate of standing between all lines and searching for ways of tolerance and understanding by transcending all prevalent categories is shared by both Third Forces, the one from the sixteenth and the one from the seventeenth century.¹⁷

III *The German Branch*

Richard Popkin's studies on the Third Force have proved seminal for other research. I only need to mention here the books by James Force and Howard Hotson, in which the intricate relations between Biblicism and science, between

¹⁵ Richard H. Popkin to Martin Mulsow, letter of 8 July 1996.

¹⁶ Heer, *Die dritte Kraft* (footnote 14), p. 7.

¹⁷ On the thinkers mentioned, see Delio Cantimori, *Italianische Häretiker der Spätrenaissance* (Basel: Schwabe, 1949); Otto Fock, *Der Socinianismus nach seiner Stellung in der Gesamtentwicklung des christlichen Geistes, nach seinem historischen Verlauf und nach seinem Lehrbegriff* (Kiel: Schröder & Camp, 1847); Wilhelm Kühnemann, *Gelehrtenrepublik und Fürstenstaat. Entwicklung und Kritik des deutschen Späthumanismus in der Literatur des Barockzeitalters* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1982).

prophecy and politics have further been illuminated.¹⁸ In order to provide just one example of how suitable for a broader application this concept actually is, I would like to take a look at similar currents in central Europe, especially in Germany. We encounter there the crucial combination of millenarianism, empirical thought, and theosophical speculation in many thinkers, such as Johann Heinrich Alsted, Abraham von Frankenberg, Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld, Hans Theodor von Tschesch, and dozens of others. They are often Calvinists, but there are Lutherans among them as well. The main problem in the case of Germany is that at first sight the empty phrase “Third Force” does not seem to work there. A wealth of catchwords or labels, under which the phenomenon ostensibly can be subsumed, exist already in Germany, such as “radical spiritualism”, “Silesian mysticism” or “Böhme-reception”.¹⁹ Accordingly, research is dominated by church historians. But the apparent advantage of this situation turns out to be a disadvantage if it is compared to recent research on the Hartlib circle and the Third Force. In the process of this research, as we know, the analysis is done in an interdisciplinary way, incorporating scientific, economic and political aspects with theological or theosophical ones.

Such an unbiased equilibrium would be needed for research on Germany as well. There one encounters numerous circles, in which mathematicians, alchemists, court people and theologians were equally fascinated with millenarianism and exchanged their ideas with each other. A systematic investigation into the question of whether they all experienced a skeptical crisis, however, is still missing. Some clues point in this direction. During the years prior to 1621, von Tschesch, for example, developed more and more doubts regarding the dogmas of the church, until he had a kind of “conversion” to a new way of spirituality, which led him to study extensively the works of Jakob Böhme.²⁰ Johann Heinrich Alsted went through a severe crisis during the first years of the Thirty Years’ War. He overcame this “eschatological crisis” by his turn to millenarianism. The crisis, to be sure, had a complex nature,

¹⁸James H. Force, ed., *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s Time and the British Isles of Newton’s Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994); idem and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *Essays on the Context, Nature and Influence of Isaac Newton’s Theology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990); Howard Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted 1588–1638. Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000); idem, *Paradise Postponed. Johann Heinrich Alsted and the Birth of Calvinist Millenarianism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001); idem, *Commonplace Learning. Ramism and its German Ramifications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹See Siegfried Wollgast, *Philosophie in Deutschland zwischen Reformation und Aufklärung 1550–1650*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie, 1993).

²⁰See Wollgast (footnote 19), pp. 762ff.

and it was triggered mainly through the experience of war, which destroyed Alsted's former astrologically based optimism and his hope for an imminent General Reformation. After the Synod of Dort at around the same time, the shift of the Calvinist Church to a stricter orthodoxy forced him to conceal his hermetic sources under the surface of a pure Biblicism.²¹ Popkin's picture of a skeptical crisis becomes more complex through case studies like this, but it becomes blurred as well. Has there been a multitude of different types of crises, each contributing to the genesis of the Third Force?²²

Let us try a different path by looking at the reception of Mede's *Clavis apocalyptica* in central Europe. The book was read, for instance, in the circle of the Austrian chiliast Johann Permeier in Preßburg (today's Bratislava), together with Alsted's *Diatribes de mille annis* and a certain "extract from Bisterfeld's book against Crell".²³ This is Bisterfeld's *De uno Deo*, which was written against the Socinianism of Johann Crell and which contains in chapter 8 of the first section of book one remarks on the Book of Daniel that attracted considerable attention in Europe.²⁴ Passages like this were copied and circulated among like-minded friends. Already in the early 1630s, Permeier was a millenarian and had founded the utopian society, "Societas regalis Jesu Christi."²⁵ In 1642 he sent a

²¹ Hotson, *Alsted* (footnote 18), p. 95ff.

²² This problem resembles the discussion about the "general crisis of the seventeenth century". See the volume edited by Trevor Aston, *Crisis in Europe 1560–1660* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); for Theodor Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Popkin's "skeptical crisis" was an important model. See p. 39f.: "Perhaps most significant was the revival of skepticism, which had lain dormant in antiquity, but which aroused new interest in the sixteenth century and experienced a real flowering in the generation of Montaigne and his immediate disciples. It is no coincidence that the organization of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century thought that most closely parallels my own is in Richard Popkin's authoritative history of skepticism. For the skeptics simply made more explicit and precise what was obviously a basic concern to their contemporaries. And whereas Popkin sees religious antagonism as the cause of the uncertainty, I see its origins in a broad range of conflict and change. Yet the end result was the same."

²³ See Balint Keserü, "In den Fußstapfen der Rosenkreuzer. Johann Permeiers Tätigkeit und Vorhaben im Karpatenbecken", in *Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica*, ed., *Rosenkreuz als europäisches Phänomen im 17. Jahrhundert* (Amsterdam: In de Pelikan, 2002); Noemi Viskolcz, *Válság és publicisztika. Egy heterodox csoport olvasmányai a harmincéves háború idején* (Szeged, 2000).

²⁴ Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld, *De uno deo patre, filio, ac spirito sancto* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1639); see my article "Bisterfelds 'Cabala'. Zur Bedeutung des Antisozinianismus für die Spätrenaissancephilosophie", in Martin Mulsow, ed., *Spätrenaissance-Philosophie in Deutschland 1570–1650* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, forthcoming).

²⁵ Richard van Dülmen, "Prophetie und Politik. Johann Permeier und die 'Societas regalis Jesu Christi' (1631–1643)", *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 41 (1978), pp. 417–473.

copy of Mede's work to Abraham von Frankenberg, and Frankenberg in turn may have passed it to Michael Gühler, a mathematician and tax collector at the court of Brieg, who then wrote his own *Clavis apocalyptica*, which was heavily influenced by Mede.²⁶ Permeier, however, had at this time become already somewhat sceptical towards millenarianism and published in the mid-1940s an "Unbiased Censure" of Bisterfeld's passages.²⁷ He was now under the influence of Florian Crusius and had become more moderate.

Our brief view of parts of the German reception of Mede has sufficed to show that millenarianism in seventeenth century Germany was a variegated phenomenon of different local groups, which were partly in contact with each other, but which were also partly critical of each other. This still constitutes a wide open field for future research, especially if this research is separated from a purely church-historical interest in the history of spiritualism, and is instead conceived more generally as a reconstruction of the underground in Germany in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.²⁸ It is now possible to rely as a starting point on the publications by Kühlmann and Telle on the Paracelsian networks, on the correspondence editions of Franckenberg and others, as well as on the CD-rom edition of the Hartlib papers.²⁹ If we remember Popkin's remark that some of the members of the Third Force "were not so spiritual or brotherly", we may ask which oppositional circles used the Biblical language only as the cover on the surface, while much deeper trans-confessional or indifferent opinions were hidden below.³⁰ We may also ask which of these circles were more isolated and which have had a greater impact.

²⁶[Michael Gühler,] *Clavis apocalyptica, or / A Prophetical KEY, by which the Great Mysteries in the Revelation of St. John, and in the Prophet Daniel are opened [...]* (1651); the original German version was published under the title: *Apocalypsis RESERATA / das ist / Geöffnete Offenbarung / Joannis [...]* ("Christianstadt", 1653). See Mulso, "Clavis apocalyptica" (footnote 5).

²⁷[Johann Permeier,] *Unpartheyische Censur und ferner nachrichtliche Bedencken über Jo. Henr. Bisterfeldii explication der göttlichen Vision Dan. 7* (1644).

²⁸For this general project, see Martin Mulso, "Die Transmission verbotenen Wissens. Über den Untergrund der deutschen Aufklärung", to appear in Ulrich Johannes Schneider, ed., *Kulturen des Wissens im 18. Jahrhundert* (forthcoming).

²⁹*Corpus Paracelsisticum*, ed. Wilhelm Kühlmann and Joachim Telle (Tübingen: Niemeyer 2001ff.), so far two volumes; *The Hartlib Papers Project*, CD-rom-Edition. On the project, see the conference volume edited by Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor, *Samuel Hartlib & Universal Reformation. Studies in Intellectual Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁰On transconfessional attitudes see the volume *Interkonfessionalität – Transkonfessionalität – binnenkonfessionelle Pluralität. Neue Forschungen zur Konfessionalisierungsthese*, eds. Kaspar von Greyerz, Mafred Jakubowski-Tiessen, Thomas Kaufmann and Hartmut Lehmann (Heidelberg: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003).

IV Containment and Delimitation

The example of the German branch of the Third Force points to a difficulty that seems to me central for our dealing with the concept of the Third Force: the difficulty of containment or delimitation. Who was part of the Third Force, and who was not? The Third Force, as Popkin conceived it, with its protagonists Mede and More, Hartlib and Comenius, Dury and Whichcote, Conway and Newton, is defined both by its typical ideas and the personal contacts of its members. If we follow the definition by ideas, we may have to exclude many persons which were otherwise in close contact to these circles, but who were no millenarians. This would, however, undermine the second component of the definition, in terms of personal contacts. A further difficulty with the definition by millenarian ideas may consist in the fact that “scientific” treatment of Biblical prophecy did not necessarily lead to millenarianism. On the contrary, it could lead to the conviction that the Biblical prophecies, especially those by Daniel, had been fulfilled already in the past. The late Arno Seifert has published an important book about this “retreat of Biblical prophecy from history” that Popkin did not know.³¹

If we look at the networks not only in England, but also in central Europe, we encounter many small, often local groups, which were connected only very loosely to the Hartlib-Comenius circle, but for which nonetheless theosophy, Bible prophecy and empirical thought were still central. When do the contacts of these circles become too loose or their ideas too different for them to be considered to be members of the Third Force? Can Mersenne still be counted as a member, since he was a friend to several of those in the Hartlib circle, even though he was also a mechanist and an intimate friend of Descartes? Are there quantitative criteria of “density of correspondence” for belonging to the Third Force? Is the criterion of self-description of that group crucial? One instance would be, for example, the lists Comenius made of people to whom he wanted to send his books or whom he intended to be part of his academy projects.³² As we see, future scholarship needs to be able to draw on precise definitions if the concept of the Third Force is to be more than a mere stimulus for a research that would soon surpass it.

³¹Arno Seifert, *Der Rückzug der biblischen Prophetie von der Geschichte. Studien zur Geschichte der Reichstheologie des frühneuzeitlichen deutschen Protestantismus* (Köln/Wien: Böhlau, 1990). I once asked Popkin if he knew the book, but he said he did not.

³²See Richard H. Popkin, “The First College for Jewish Studies”, *Revue des études juives* 143 (1984), pp. 351–364.

V Constellation Analysis

In this regard, I would like to offer some proposals. I have already talked about the advantages of an empty phrase. An empty phrase facilitates the balancing act that we perform when we define the Third Force by both its intellectual profile and the network of actors. I think that this balancing act explains the reason why this concept is so appealing, but it is also the cause of specific problems. How can the two things – the reconstruction of networks and the analysis of ideas – coexist? In order to answer this question, I have recently edited a collective volume under the title “constellation analysis” (*Konstellationsforschung*).³³ It draws on ideas that Dieter Henrich has developed for the analysis of small groups in the earliest phase of German Idealism, from which spread the first impulses to take Kantian thought in new directions.³⁴ A constellation, according to this account, is a small creative group of persons in face-to-face contact or at least in correspondence with each other. Through their interchange emerge theories, which could not be understood by looking only at the development of the members of the group separately. Dieter Henrich has invested much energy in order to reconstruct in a precise way the step-by-step progression of thought inside these constellations. This includes a reconstruction of possible conversations, through an examination of letters or diaries, but also through a precise determination of what these people could have read at a certain point in time: if in week x a specific article or review has appeared, then it was possible that person y and person z had a conversation about it and in the course of their discussion, they may have revised their opinions.

Research on the Third Force surely is still far away from this level of precision, except, perhaps, for research on Newton. But I believe that it may be a good candidate for a constellation analysis.³⁵ There are, however, problems to be solved in advance, especially problems of scale. I return here to the problem of containment that I have already discussed. The Third Force, conceived as essentially the network of the Hartlib-Comenius circle, with some additions, is certainly a big network, consisting of dozens, even hundreds of people. As such it is far too big and diffuse for the kind of precise research

³³Martin Mulsow and Marcelo Stamm, eds., *Konstellationsforschung* (footnote 4).

³⁴Dieter Henrich, *Konstellationen. Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991); idem, *Der Grund im Bewußtsein. Untersuchungen zu Hölderlins Denken (1794–1795)* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992); idem, *Grundlegung aus dem Ich. Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte des Idealismus, Tübingen-Jena 1790–1794* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004).

³⁵See my attempt to generalize the concept of constellation analysis: “Zum Methodenprofil der Konstellationsforschung”, in Mulsow/Stamm, eds., *Konstellationsforschung* (footnote 4), pp. 74–97.

described above. In addition, as we have noticed, not all members of this network were millenarians. It therefore remains an important objective to single out much smaller constellations – more dense and homogeneous relationships – from this network. This could involve studying small local circles of friends in Amsterdam, London or Hamburg. But it is also possible to think of groups of correspondents, who discussed matters in letters, although they were separated by long distances, as Hartlib and Comenius were for most of their time. Only small groups like these provide enough homogeneity for an analysis in a sufficient way. Howard Hotson, for example, has proposed to examine the region of Danzig and Elbing between 1625 and 1630 with its milieu of uprooted Rosicrucians, spiritualists, enthusiasts, and reformers in order to understand the genesis of Hartlib's and Dury's millenarianism.³⁶

Once the scope of analysis has been reduced this way, research on the Third Force will rise to a new level. At this level, the development of similarities and differences among these thinkers will surface to a much greater extent. Sarah Hutton has sketched a similar outline for research on the Cambridge Platonists.³⁷ For smaller groups of this size, it may then be possible to determine the “framework of thought” (Denkraum), as Henrich has labeled it: the compound of shared premises, basic ideas, basic problems and attempts of solution that characterized them. This will give us the chance to get away from one-sided explanations and to recognize also less visible alternatives. Hotson stated that Alsted's “scientific” interpretation of Bible prophecy is ultimately eclectic.³⁸ For our problem of describing the framework of thought, this means that there are several possible descriptions. Millenarianism can be understood from several different points of view. First, as the case of Alsted suggests, it can be seen as a transformation of hermetic, Lullist and astrological ideas into a language of millenarian interpretation of Bible prophecy. On the one hand, this transformation had some dissimulative features, since after the synod of Dord and the attacks against the Rosicrucians it was no longer prudent to be identified as a hermeticist. On the other hand, it meant a revocation of the original optimism of his astrology of history, which, in the face of the Thirty Years War, was replaced by a mere hope of better times. Second, the genesis of millenarianism can be described, as Richard Popkin did, from the perspective of early modern neo-pyrrhonism, because pyrrhonism's questioning of all knowledge evoked the desire for certainty, even if it is grounded in a special

³⁶ Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted* (footnote 18).

³⁷ Sarah Hutton, “Eine Cambridge-Konstellation? Perspektiven für eine Konstellationsforschung zu den Platonikern von Cambridge”, in Mulsow/Stamm, eds., *Konstellationsforschung* (footnote 4), pp. 340–358.

³⁸ Hotson, *Alsted* (footnote 18).

method of Bible exegesis. Perhaps millenarianism could even be described as having originated from other motives.

These different descriptions show that a “framework of thought” cannot be conceived as a static entity – it is an intrinsically dynamic concept. Above all, internal problems and differences are the cause of the emergence of new attempts of solution. As a matter of fact, the Third Force was, despite all its coherence, a network full of differences. Maybe one should even label the group as a group on the margins and fringes, or a hybrid entity. If we consider Alsted’s case again, his millenarianism resulted from the blending of some marginal alchemical or astrological traditions with impacts from more scholastic or mainstream theology and philosophy. Similar statements could certainly be made about Mede, More, or Comenius. A “group on the margins” also describes the spatial structure of the Third Force, since it emerged on the fringes of the Thirty Years War, from Transylvania through Poland, Scandinavia and Holland to England.³⁹ These fringes were filled with refugees who brought their traditions and ideas, and often – as in Poland or Transylvania – the borderline position of the country made it harder for orthodoxy to control it.⁴⁰

One difference among many in the hybrid entity of the Third Force was the question of whether empirical research was more important than theosophical speculation, or vice versa. Let us look at a letter in which the physician and scientist Cyprian Kinner complains to Hartlib about the philosopher Georg Ritschel: “How can he compose his ideas of things in a complete and sound way, if he does not recognize the ponderosity of nature; even if he copies thousands of Bacons, Herberts, or other important philosophers?”⁴¹

A cause of a new dynamic in a constellation could be the arrival of a new person. Examples would be the appearance of Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont in Cambridge Platonism, or the impact of Herbert of Cherbury on the Comenius circle. Such new impacts have created disturbances, which had to be processed in a productive way.⁴²

³⁹ On this spacial aspect, see Mulsow, “Bisterfelds, Cabala” (footnote. 24).

⁴⁰ See Graeme Murdock, *Calvinism on the Frontier 1600–1660. International Calvinism and the Reformed Church in Hungary and Transylvania* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁴¹ Kinner to Hartlib, 23.I.1647, Hartlib Papers 1/33/6A-B: “At quomodo [...] suas Rerum Ideas vere, plane, ac harmonice, conscribet, ponderis Naturae ignarus? In aeternum hic haerebit: licet vel mille Verulamios, Herbertos, aliosque summos Philosophos, transcribat.” See Mulsow, “Metaphysikentwürfe” (footnote 4), p. 247f.

⁴² On Van Helmont see Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century. The Life and Thought of Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698)* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); on Herbert of Cherbury and Comenius, see Mulsow, “Metaphysikentwürfe” (footnote 4), p. 245f.

Popkin's central argument concerning the skeptical challenge would, in the language of constellation analysis, be an argument about the initial dynamic of certain constellations inside the Third Force. It would have to be described in a precise way in its relation to other dynamics or other challenges, which could certainly relativize its importance. Furthermore, its significance would have to be specified in regard to certain constellations, and then again distinguished from others.

A last and final suggestion: It does not seem a coincidence to me that many thinkers of the Third Force were extremely mobile during their life. Comenius, van Helmont, Hartlib, Alsted, Bisterfeld, Dury: they all were migrants, partly for intellectual reasons, partly for economic reasons, but mostly because of war or persecution. The changes that migrants undergo when they have to replace one cultural context for another, are explored today under the labels of "cultural exchange" or "cultural translation", with considerable conceptual effort. Research on cultural exchange is especially attentive to cultural misunderstandings, mistranslations, conceptual change, and intermediary functions.⁴³ Even if millenarianism was a real international movement, there were, if we look closely, significant differences of local, confessional, or natural traditions and contexts. Therefore, the reading of Alsted in England or of Mede in Germany could mean an altering of original intentions. The *revolutio* of Alsted's astrological history became in Civil War England suddenly a "revolution", and in turn the predictions of English millenarians were read in Germany against the background of the military invasions of the Spaniards or Swedes.

Thus in the end there remains the conclusion that Richard Popkin's concept of the Third Force has been an immensely fruitful stimulus for research, and I believe that it will endure as an important framework of studies, if we enhance it with new developments in intellectual history, new conceptual schemes, and especially if we transfer it to a new level of precision, by dividing it into unities of a smaller scale, which can be explored in a much more subtle way.

⁴³See Peter Burke and Ronnie Po-chia Hsia, eds., *Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2007); Peter Burke, *Kultureller Austausch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000); Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, eds., *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l'espace franco-allemand (XVIIIe e XIXe siècle)* (Paris, 1988); Wolfgang Schmale, ed., *Kulturtransfer. Kulturelle Praxis im 16. Jahrhundert* (Innsbruck: Wiener Schriften, 2003). I have tried to use these concepts for understanding Socinianism. See: "The 'New Socinians'. Intertextuality and Cultural Exchange in Late Socinianism" in Martin Mulsow and Jan Rohls, eds., *Socinianism and Arminianism. Antitrinitarians, Calvinists, and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth Century Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 49–78.