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Is the Future a Foreign Country?

Stephanie Lawson
Macquarie University

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.¹

The past is a foreign country: I don’t visit there any more.²

Abstract
The notion of the past as a foreign country has become a standard trope in contextual approaches to the study of history, emphasizing specificity, particularity and contingency. Considering the relationship not simply between past and present, but past, present and future obviously adds a further dimension to the problem. If the past is a foreign country, what about the future? This question is addressed first by examining the notion of incommensurability. I shall demonstrate that contextualist approaches, at least in the more radical versions, posit an essential incommensurability between past and present that has quite profound implications for both normative theory and methodology – and indeed for the relationship between norms and methods in the pursuit of social scientific knowledge about past, present and future. The second part of the paper considers the matter of responsibility and/or accountability for the past, present and future. More generally I shall argue a case for the commensurability of past, present and future as methodologically more coherent and certainly more tenable in normative terms. Finally, I consider certain policy implications with particular reference to aspects of responsibility and accountability borne by any present generation for both the past and the future.

Introduction
The discipline of International Relations (IR) is conventionally understood as the study of relations between states in an international system of states. While this traditional approach is now challenged by broader conceptions, often expressed in terms of ‘world politics’ and incorporating a host of non-state actors and entities, states remain prominent and powerful actors as well as sites of meaning and identity. With respect to each other, these states are, by definition, ‘foreign countries’, each possessing different (domestic or internal) political, economic and social attributes which combine to produce a distinctive ‘culture’. The latter phenomenon or category is further assumed to be the principle source of norms, standards, values, interests and so on. Much normative international theory in recent years, insofar as it has revolved around competing ideas about communitarianism and cosmopolitanism (or particularism and universalism), has therefore been concerned with the role of culture in producing norms and values as well as with the location of culture in both domestic and international (or global) terms. Alongside these concerns, the notion of the past as a foreign country possessing a culture

² Student with troubled past declaring strategy for moving on. Personal communication.
of its own, and therefore a distinctive way of life derived from the norms and values extant at the particular time and place under study, has had a vitally important place in historiography in recent years. Indeed, it underpins a range of contemporary contextual approaches to the study of history which emphasize specificity, particularity and contingency.

Some recent work in IR has sought to bring historiographical issues more squarely into focus. Geoffrey Roberts, for example, has sought to show how narrative history can contribute to IR theory not simply ‘as an adjunct or empirical resource, but as a theoretical perspective in its own right.’ He goes on to note that although there narrative historians and postmodernists are at odds on the question of whether historical narratives are simply fictional creations (with narrative historians insisting that it is possible to tell true stories about the past), both approaches ‘share a preference for the telling of local and particular stories rather than grand narratives of human and social development.’

This is similar to George Lawson’s assessment that much contemporary IR theory, in so far as it has adopted historical and interpretive approaches, has tended to focus on ‘micro-narratives that provide ample details about the richness of thick historical experience, but little insight into the broader patterns, trends, and trajectories that make up contemporary world politics.’ He goes on to make a case for the incorporation of insights and strategies from historical sociology (and especially historical institutionalism) to assist IR scholars in the exploration of major trends and causal patterns in world politics. As we shall see, the present discussion also aims to make a case for taking a broader view of historical and political developments linking past, present and future in both methodological and normative terms.

In historiography, the idea that the past is a foreign country provides support for the notion that the different cultural contexts in which historical acts and events have occurred may possess very different standards and values, relative to those of the present. In stronger versions of the contextual thesis, these standards and values are posited as incommensurable with those of the present, thereby providing the basis for a form of methodological contextualism which assumes a radical disjunction between past and present. As a corollary, methodological contextualism supports a form of normative contextualism which holds that one ought not to judge past actions by the standards and values of the present, but only those prevailing in the historical context in which they occurred.

This mode of thinking has many antecedents, most obviously in cultural anthropology (as developed primarily, but not exclusively, in the US) where ethnographers have been enjoined – initially on methodological grounds – not to judge the practices of ‘other cultures’ by the standards of one’s own, but only in their own terms, and therefore in their own context. Again, this underpins a normative disposition inclining ethnographers in the tradition of cultural anthropology to refrain from making normative judgements about Other cultural formations based on the standards of their

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2 Ibid.
own, and so forestalling the problem of (wrongly) assuming the superiority of one’s own norms, standards and values over and above those of Others.

In Anglophone historiography, a similar methodological and normative position first gained prominence through the emergence of critiques of ‘whig history’, followed by the emergence of the influential Cambridge school of historical contextualism and the more general rise of ‘cultural history’. The work which most explicitly foregrounded this theme, however, was written by the geographer David Lowenthal whose special interest in the heritage industry led him to examine how the past is used (very often instrumentally as it turns out) in the service of various causes in the present. The title of his book, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, was taken from a phrase penned by L.P. Hartley in his novel, *The Go-Between* (cited above) and turned into a key theme underpinning strong notions of a disjunction between past and present book expressed in terms of their essential incommensurability.

The past … is … largely an artefact of the present. However faithfully we preserve, however authentically we restore, however deeply we immerse ourselves in by gone times, *life back then was based on ways of being and believing incommensurable with our own.*

Whether intended or not, Lowenthal’s invocation of incommensurability, which implies the lack of any common measure, effectively posits a radical disjunction between past and present, and in the process supports the idea of history as a series of largely discontinuous moments. But this disjunction, and the implications that flow from it, is not simply a methodological issue. As suggested above, normative issues are often deeply implicated in methodological ones. It therefore raises some important questions concerning how we regard matters of moral responsibility and accountability between past and present.

Extending our consideration to the relationship between past, present and future clearly adds a further dimension. While we can be fairly certain that ways of life in the future will be as different from our own as those of the past, and that contexts for action and belief will inevitably shift and change, what does it mean to say that those ways of life are (or will be) incommensurable with those of the present? More generally, does the methodological bracketing of periods, epochs, stages and so on of the past, present and future into separate, discontinual contextual moments also imply a normative disjunction?

This paper argues that while attention to context certainly matters in attempts to understand the past, it ought not lure us into adopting a problematic notion of incommensurability between past and present. It will be shown that such a move has quite profound implications for normative theory especially as it relate to issues of responsibility and accountability borne by any present generation for both the past and the future. This line of argument cuts against the grain of contemporary cultural history, and cognate developments elsewhere in the human sciences, which have been concerned to emphasize specificity, particularity and discontinuity at the expense of any broader scope, especially one which smacks of universalist ‘pretensions’.

The discussion begins with an overview of relevant developments in the theorization of past and present. Here we see that the effort to denounce ‘presentism’ in

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historical studies has led to an approach to history stressing discontinuities rather than continuities. Combined with the ideas of the broader cultural turn in the human sciences, much historiographical emphasis has been on notions of context and its role in underpinning new methodological approaches, especially in the history of ideas. But there are other approaches promoting quite different ways of thinking about the relationship between past, present and future. In addition to notions of the *longue durée*, developments in path dependence on the one hand, and counterfactual history on the other, also incorporate notions of continuity in history.

We then turn more specifically to the rise of contextualism as a method for the study of history and certain problems posed by the logic underpinning it. The following section discusses the idea of incommensurability and its implications for continuity and discontinuity through time. Just as importantly, we consider the possibility of the commensuration of different contexts through time and space. In the final part, two relevant cases are considered briefly. The first illustrates the importance of acknowledging the normative links between past and present through a brief account of the politics of Japan’s war memories while the second exemplifies the link between the present and the future by reference to contemporary environmental issues. Taken together, these examples demonstrate a case for the commensuration of past, present and future in both methodological and normative terms.

**Theories of Past and Present**

Several related developments in twentieth century Anglophone historiography are deeply implicated in normative political theory and, by extension, in theory and practice in world politics. The first was initiated by Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History*, first published in 1931, where the author famously excoriated the tendency among historians to compose narratives extolling the glories of carefully selected past events which, taken together, constituted a triumphant procession leading to the ‘ratification if not glorification of the present.’ Butterfield saw that a direct consequence of this tendency was not simply the assigning of a certain *telos* to historical processes – essentially a morality tale of Progress – but the interpretation of the past in terms of present concerns and interests. This, he suggested, invariably produces distortions as history is made to conform to those concerns and interests.  

And while whig history studied the past with an eye to the present, for Butterfield the proper study of history elucidates ‘the unlikenesses between past and present.’ He further proposed that ‘the natural result of the whig historian’s habits of mind and his attitude to history – though it is not a necessary consequence of his actual method – [is] that he should be interested in the promulgation of moral judgements and should count this as an important part of his office.’

He also discerned a ‘treacherous’ concern on the part of whig historians to deliberately conceal their biases by abstracting events from their context and setting them up ‘in implied comparison with the present day, and then to pretend that by this “the facts” are allowed to “speak for themselves”’. While the principle target of Butterfield’s

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10 Ibid., p. 105.
critique were certain liberal myths of English history and politics revolving around parliament and the monarchy, the more general purchase of Butterfield’s critique opened up new vistas for historians interested in problems of historiographical method and how these relate to moral judgements of past actions.

A further significant development, and one which owes an important debt to Butterfield’s insights, emerges largely from the work of the ‘Cambridge School’ of historical contextualism of which Quentin Skinner is a major figure and whose work on contextualism in intellectual and political history has had a profound influence on a whole generation of scholars. Clear parallels with Butterfield’s ideas are reflected in Skinner’s declaration that: ‘Ideological arguments are commonly sustained by an appeal to the past, an appeal either to see precedents in history for new claims being advanced, or to see history itself as a development towards the point of view being advocated or denounced.’ He went beyond Butterfield, however, in critiquing more fully the anachronistic character of certain moralizing tendencies in historiography, tendencies clearly derived from present concerns, perspectives and standards rather than those of whatever past was under scrutiny.

Skinner also drew on R.G. Collingwood in criticizing the notion that the history of ideas reveals perennial problems or timeless questions. Thus the great texts of (European) history – such as those of Thucydides, St Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes and so on – ought not to be construed as containing a timeless wisdom that stands outside of the contexts in which they were produced and which can therefore speak to the moral sensibilities of generations through the ages. This accords closely with critiques of realist thought in International Relations which, at least in its classical manifestations, tends to read off these very same texts as providing enduring lessons for successive generations. In realist thought, however, the tendency is to emphasize the amoral character of power politics across the generations rather than any moral linkages as such.

Skinner’s remedy for neutralizing the impact of present ideologies and interests in the reading of the past – at least in intellectual history – and thereby producing a more objective account of what past thinkers really meant to say or do with their texts, was to institute a thoroughgoing contextual methodology. This required going beyond a reading of the text in its own terms to consideration of the broader social context within which any given text is historically situated, a strategy offering ‘considerable help in avoiding the anachronistic mythologies.’

The Skinnerian method thus embraces a strong form of historicism emphasizing the uniqueness of historical moments and therefore the

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13 For a recent critique of such tendencies in realist thought, see D. Welch, ‘Why International Relations Theorists Should Stop Reading Thucydides’, *Review of International Studies*, 29 (3), 301–19.
14 The contrast between the lessons of amorality in history reflected in classical realism, and the idea of moral linkages (and possible progress) in more liberal versions is an interesting issue, but not one that can be pursued at length here.
discontinuous nature of history itself, all directed at countering the insidious ‘presentist’ tendencies of the body of work against which the method is constructed.\textsuperscript{16}

All this reflects a broader, pervasive development throughout the humanities and social sciences. Writing in the early 1990s, Richard Bernstein pointed to diverse currents emanating from both Anglo-American postempiricist philosophy of science and continental psostructuralism, signaling a reaction against hitherto dominant tendencies in the history of Western philosophy. These revolved around concepts of ‘incommensurability’, ‘otherness’, ‘alterity’, ‘singularity’, ‘difference’, ‘plurality’ – reverberating as signifiers – all ‘signs of a pervasive amorphous mood … of deconstruction, destabilization, rupture and fracture – of resistance to all forms of abstract totality, universalism, and rationalism.’\textsuperscript{17}

All these ideas infuse the more general phenomenon known as the ‘cultural turn’, an intellectual movement seeking to reveal the futility of the quest for objective, universally valid knowledge, not only in the humanities and social sciences but in the natural sciences as well, and calling for closer attention to the contexts within which people are embedded and which constitute the primary realm of intersubjective meaning and understanding. This further reinforced the methodological and normative trend to contextualism. In the discipline of history, it led to the development of what Megill calls ‘a new hegemonizing and imperializing fraction of the discipline, the so-called “new cultural history,”’ arising in the 1980s ‘as both an extension of and a rebellion against the dominance of social history.’\textsuperscript{18}

In other disciplines concerned more with contemporary developments, this usually meant contextualization on the basis of ‘culture’, conceptualized in terms of spatially dispersed and relatively self-contained entities.\textsuperscript{19} A focus on the everyday realm of intersubjective meaning and understanding had also characterized the work of E. P. Thompson who, together with Raymond Williams, inaugurated cultural studies as something of a ‘counter-discipline’.\textsuperscript{20} Thompson’s work in particular infused Marxism with a radical historicism which, while retaining an essential materialism, invoked the concrete experiences of everyday life embedded in contingent historical moments.\textsuperscript{21} In general terms, then, large groups such as nations and regions and broad trends over long periods gave way to ‘microhistory, the revival of narrative, and the history of everyday life’ while the idea of ‘society’ was replaced by ‘culture’ as a key organizing concept.\textsuperscript{22} The idea of context could then be associated not just with historical moments separated in

\textsuperscript{16} For a discussion of historicism and presentism as opposed approaches to history – and an alternative methodology to both – see Steven Seidman, ‘Beyond Presentism and Historicism: Understanding the History of Social Science’, Sociological Inquiry, 53 (1), 1983, p. 80.


\textsuperscript{18} Alan Megill, ‘Coherence and Incoherence in Historical Studies: From the Annales School to the New Cultural History’, New Literary History, 35 (2), 2004, p. 207. Note, however, that Megill also sees certain parallels between the ideas of the Annales School and the new cultural history in the search for coherence.


time, but with cultural formations both within larger, usually national formations – as represented, for example, by minority groups or classes – as well as those separated in space in accordance with traditional anthropological approaches.

As a corollary to the view of historical contexts as unique and, indeed, incommensurable, and of the past as existing in it its own terms, contextual/historicist approaches are strongly at odds with notions of historical continuity between past and present. Further, the ‘new historicism’ of contextualist approaches focused on the extent to which contingency attends the ‘march of history’. Indeed, the emphasis on contingency has been taken to imply that history does not ‘march’ at all in the sense that it proceeds via sequences of events that, in hindsight at least, exhibit some degree of order or pattern. Rather, it stumbles along in a directionless series of ultimately disconnected moments spread out across time and space.

Consideration of the past and its relationship with the present, however, is only one part of the equation. When we push the logic of a contextual/historicist approaches in the other direction, towards the future rather than the past, then it follows that the future must also be treated as a foreign country, also incommensurable with the present. We consider some of the consequences later in the discussion.

Contrasting Approaches
Notwithstanding the impact of contextual/historicist approaches, there is important work in other fields of historical research underpinned by quite different assumptions. The most obvious is that of Fernand Braudel and the Annales school. Here an emphasis on the study of the longue durée requires a strong sense of continuity in history and a panoramic view of its movements. This approach aimed to transcend the history of mere ‘events’ (including those of the present moment) as depicted in orthodox diplomatic and political history.\(^{23}\) In critiquing those who saw history as discontinuous and fragmented, Braudel argued that such views would have the social sciences remain imprisoned in the brief living moment: ‘The present is for them a more or less autonomous reality.’ \(^{24}\) The Annales historians, however, generally showed disdain for exactly the kind of naïve positivism in historiography ‘in terms of which the historian’s discourse was traditionally thought to be a faithful record of a world of objective facts.’ Thus ‘the factual descriptions which result are not the source of meaning – they presuppose it.’ \(^{25}\) Butterfield, Skinner and a whole generation of cultural historians would almost certainly agree, although they clearly part company with Braudel in other ways.

As much as Braudel may be admired as a historian, his critique of discontinuity and the autonomy of the moment seems to have had little impact on the development of cultural history where the theoretical emphasis remains on the specificity of historical moments. But there are at least two other lines of contemporary enquiry, related largely

\(^{23}\) See especially Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, transl. Sian Reynolds, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996. (is Braudel a social historian with moral concerns … in contrast with cultural historians who reject the notion of history as concerned with moral issues?).


to notions of causation, which have the potential to counter an excessive emphasis on discontinuity. The first centres on the notion of path dependence which has become a focus for politico-historical institutional studies, historical sociology, economic history and some areas of economics in recent years. The second line of enquiry, not altogether unrelated to the first and also attracting increasing attention, is counterfactual history which poses the simple ‘what if’ question to generate sets of alternative scenarios as to how history has turned out to date, or of how the past has become this particular present. With respect to path dependency, the term itself conveys a strong, even deterministic sense of a sequential relationship between past, present and future. Beyond this ostensibly straightforward sense, it is frequently observed that the notion of path dependence is used in different ways to underpin different kinds of projects, resulting in confusion over exactly how it should be deployed. One commentator suggests that usage tends to fluctuate between broader and narrower conceptions, but that the conceptual stretching involved in broader usages, which sometimes amount to little more than an assertion that ‘history matters’, is not very useful in social scientific terms. The specific key claims of path dependence and their implications for methodology, however, are clear enough. Paul Pierson summarizes these succinctly: Starting from a similar set of conditions a wide range of outcomes are possible; large consequences do not necessarily emanate from large events but may be a product of relatively minor or contingent events; certain courses of action, once started, may prove almost impossible to reverse; as a consequence, political development is often characterized by critical junctures that shape future patterns of political life. Just as importantly, Pierson goes on to point out that all these features contrast sharply with predominant modes of explanation in the political sciences. These, he says, ‘attribute “large” outcomes to “large causes” and emphasize the prevalence of unique, predictable political outcomes, the irrelevance of timing and sequence, and the capacity of rational actors to design and implement optimal solutions (given their resources and constraints) to the problems that confront them.’

Counterfactual history is more speculative in that it relies, at least to an extent, on the conduct of thought experiments, although these are not unrelated to empirical data. Once dismissed by E.H. Carr as a mere parlour game, counterfactual history has grown as a serious field of research in recent years, with counterfactual thought experiments in world politics playing an important role in thinking through causal factors and the

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26 See, for example, James Mahoney, ‘Path Dependence in Historical Sociology’, Theory and Society, 29 (4), 2000, p. 507. Note also that Braudel’s influence is evident in the work of historical sociologists such as Charles Tilly, John Hall and Michael Mann as well as Immanuel Wallerstein (who founded the Fernand Braudel Center at SUNY Binghamton in 1976). For a commentary on this influence, see Peter Burke, ‘The Annales, Braudel and Historical Sociology’ in Gerard Delanty and Engin Fahri Isin (eds), Handbook of Historical Sociology, London, Sage, 2003, pp. 58-63.


28 Paul Pierson, ‘Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics’, American Political Science Review, 94 (2), 2000, p. 252. He advocates a much narrower conception which holds that ‘preceding steps in a particular direction induce further steps along the same path’, underpinning an ‘increasing returns’ phenomenon familiar to economists.

29 Ibid., p. 251.
sequences they generate.\textsuperscript{30} This has implications not only for the study of the past and the ‘possible worlds’ that may have come about, but for future possible worlds as well. This has led to studies in counterfactual inference as a basis for prediction, although as with any form of futurism these are scarcely without problems.\textsuperscript{31} More generally, Richard Ned Lebow argues that counterfactual analysis, properly applied, can help to ‘combat the propensity to see the future as more contingent than the past, reveal contradictions in our belief systems, and highlight double standards in our moral judgements.’\textsuperscript{32}

To summarize, notions of the longue durée, theories of path dependence and approaches deploying counterfactual analysis join with historicist/contextualist approaches in emphasizing the contingency of historical developments. But whereas the latter tend to emphasize discontinuities so as to distance themselves from the whiggish approach criticized by Butterfield and others, and to explicitly counter the perceived errors of ‘presentism’ implicit in these approaches, these concerns do not feature prominently in the former approaches. Rather, they emphasize the importance of continuity in historical analysis, but without incorporating the fallacious assumptions of ‘Whig history’, at least as Butterfield and other critics have described it. But contextualism also rests on certain, possibly fallacious assumptions, as we see next.

The Logic of Contextualism
The idea of context is frequently invoked but rarely examined in much detail in contemporary historical studies, and indeed in most other branches of the human sciences. The exception is in philosophical linguistics and epistemology where contextualism has been deployed primarily against skepticism by linking ‘truth’ to specific contexts. Skinner’s work in fact owes a significant debt to the linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin, bringing his speech act theory to bear on the attempt to explain what historical figures actually intended to do in composing their texts, within their own social contexts, which in turn helps us to discern their essential meaning. Thus the social context is assumed to contain within it the standards of rationality and morality acceptable to the particular time and place and which therefore inform the beliefs, mindset, values and so on of any given author.

As suggested earlier, this is very similar to the contextualist assumptions of cultural anthropology in which standards of rationality and morality are taken to be commensurate with ‘the culture’ of the group or society under consideration. We consider this further shortly. The prior concern is with the attempt to establish contextualism as a preferred methodology and what implications this has for normative theory in terms of judging the past in the present. We therefore look briefly at the meaning of ‘context’ and its treatment in philosophical linguistics and epistemology.

In its simplest sense, context refers to ‘that which environs the object of our interest and helps by its relevance to explain it’. (Scharfstein, 1989, p. 1). In more technical epistemological terms, contextualism refers to ‘the doctrine that the

\textsuperscript{30} See, for example, Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, \textit{Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives}, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996.


proposition expressed by a knowledge attribution relative to a context is determined in part by the standards of justification salient in that context.’ So the linguistic thesis holds that claims to ‘know’ something, to elicit meaning, or to impute truth-value, are ultimately context dependent and therefore variable across time and space (see Brady and Pritchard, 2005, p.161; Cohen, 1999, p.57). Contextualism therefore appears as a sub-species of relativism. The latter is broader because a notion of ‘environment’ is not essential; rather, objects, ideas, beliefs and so on can simply be relative to each other and not mediated by ‘a context’. Generally speaking, contextualism as methodology affords insights into how contexts explain, and regards explanation as ‘impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into account’ (Scharfstein, 1989, pp. 1–2).

Although affording useful insights, at least two basic problems relevant to methodological contextualism have been identified in these formulations. First, if causality is attributed to context, then it becomes an integral part of the phenomenon rather than its environment. So once the distinction between phenomenon and environment is extinguished via a causal connection, the role of ‘context’ is annullled (Collier and Mazzuca, 2006, p. 475). Second, there are no rules concerning how ‘context’ may be applied or what its limits may be (Ben-Ami Scharfstein 1989, p. 3). Indeed, it is hard to envisage how any given context can be specified in terms of one clearly identifiable set of circumstances marked off from other such sets in time and/or space. Thus the attempt to establish the specificity of historical moments or periods as forming ‘a context’ is mired in the ambiguities of where contextual boundaries may be set. As with any exercise in periodization, these can only ever be arbitrary – and relative to other arbitrary periodizations.

Then there is the problem of relativism. As I have discussed elsewhere, methodological contextualists, as with many anthropologists, may not wish to be labeled relativists, and Skinner himself has responded to accusations of relativism by arguing that although he has relativized the notion of ‘holding true a given belief’, he has never claimed that there was nothing more to truth than acceptability. Further, unlike a conceptual relativist, he says that he is not trying to offer a definition of truth at all. But if meaning is relative to context, which is what contextualism seems to establish as a methodological rule, it is hard to escape the inference that contextualism is relativism by another name whether one is offering a definition of truth or not. On the normative side, to the extent that contextualism as a form of historicism renders historical moments as utterly unique, and we are enjoined to refrain from judging past thoughts and deeds from

34 Note that all periodizations are effectively relative chronologies since they are based on the interdependence of the data being studied. See Gavin Lucas, The Archeology of Time, London, Routledge, 2005.
35 Lawson, Culture and Context, p.
36 This appears to be the case with Geertz as well who, in one well-known piece, studiously avoids endorsing relativism and indeed claims that it is an invention in fact concocted largely by the very ant-relativists who condemn it as they feed off it, thus producing, among other things certain ‘absurd positions’ such as ‘culture-is-all historicism’ (p. 268). See, Clifford Geertz, ‘Distinguished Lecture: Anti-Anti-Relativism’, American Anthropologist, 86 (2) 1984, pp. 236-278.
the normative standpoint of the present, it is difficult to see how one can evade the conclusion that historical contextualism is a form of ethical relativism.\(^\text{38}\)

The resonances of Skinnerian historicism and contextualism with anthropological theories of cultural relativism should also be clear. Beginning with Bronislaw Malinowski as well as the immensely influential school of cultural anthropology in the US founded by Franz Boas and his students, ‘cultural context’ has been posited as the very foundation for serious ethnographic work.\(^\text{39}\) This was later reinforced by symbolical modes of anthropology introduced through the interpretive strategies of Clifford Geertz who joined hermeneutic ideas with the Parsonian formulation of culture as a system of meanings that must be understood in its own terms.\(^\text{40}\) But while the hermeneutics of earlier scholars such as Wilhelm Dilthey proposed a framework for dealing with history, it has been said that symbolic anthropology tended towards rarefied abstractions which became increasingly distanced from considerations of history as well as the possibilities of change.\(^\text{41}\) Or as Ernest Gellner put it in his inimitable style: ‘A ‘hermeneutic’ account of a political system leaves us wondering whether we have been offered an explanation of social order, or merely a description of its atmosphere.’\(^\text{42}\)

A further problem emerges when the logic of historical contextualism is examined alongside that of cultural contextualism. The former rests on the assumption of a disjunction between past and present while the latter is usually posited in terms of cultural tradition requiring a firm partnership between them. This suggests that the invocation of cultural and historical specificity in the same breathe – now a very common practice across the human sciences – generates a very significant contradiction yet to be resolved in methodological terms.\(^\text{43}\) Other more general problems have been identified in terms of agency. Writing on culturalist trends in international history, Andrew J. Rotter argues that by emphasizing context over more direct questions cause and effect, culturalist approaches seem to have abandoned concerns over historical agency. Instead, ‘culturalists revert vaugely to a thing’s “constructedness”, or a “discourse”, without apparently caring who constructed the thing or how the discourse made something actually happen.’\(^\text{44}\)

The critique so far has highlighted certain problems in the deployment of contextual methodology. Its importance as a guide to good practice in the history of ideas, however, is not easily dismissed. Certainly, there is no denying its value in alerting the historian to the pitfalls of a facile universalism as well as the ever-present danger of blind anachronism, misplaced moralism and the progressive march of history to a glorious present and perhaps more glorious future. But care also needs to be taken in specifying what exactly constitutes anachronism. For present purposes, I take it to encompass the following: assuming unwarranted continuities with the past; projecting

\(^{38}\) King, *Thinking Past*, p. 209.


\(^{43}\) This is discussed in much greater detail in Stephanie Lawson, ‘Political Studies and the Contextual Turn: A Normative Methodological Critique’, *Political Studies*, 56 (3), 2008: 584-603.

one’s own values back into the past in order to pass inappropriate moral judgment; or interpreting the past improperly for the purpose of legitimating something in the present.

These are all linked to the insight that what is actually at issue in the writing of history at any given time are specific current concerns. And here, historians such as Butterfield, Skinner, Lowenthal and numerous other followers clearly have a very important point to make. But it simply does not follow that all attempts to link past and present through assumptions of historic continuity are erroneous. Similarly, there is no reason to accept a blanket injunction against all judgments of the past by the standards and values of the present. While there is often a fine line between, say, an appropriate and an inappropriate exercise in moral judgement of past events or actions, and plenty of scope for debate over the merits of individual cases, the difficulty of trying to tread that line should not be abandoned in favour of simply positing an absolute injunction against all judgments of past actions. That is the easy way out. In summary, neither the possibility of some moral judgments, nor the denial of the legitimacy of present concerns in the study of the past, should be precluded by the invocation of a simplistic formulation of anachronism. By adopting a more nuanced approach to the problem of anachronism and admitting qualifications as suggested above, a viable scheme for the commensuration of past and present in methodological and/or normative terms is achievable. This brings us next to the notion of incommensurability and its implications for the normative links between past, present and future.

The Problem of Incommensurability

Thomas Kuhn is probably the most influential figure behind contemporary discussions of incommensurability as it relates to the concerns of this paper. Interestingly, the introduction to his key work refered explicitly to the role of history, revealing an approach directly comparable with Skinnerian contextualism and signalling a significant historiographical ‘turn’ in the study of science. Here, Kuhn suggested that the ‘cumulative development line’ familiar to the practitioners of ‘normal science’ was in the process of being replaced by new approaches:

Rather than seeking the permanent contributions of an older science to our present vantage, they attempt to display the historical integrity of that science in its own time. They ask, for example, not about the relation of Galileo’s views to those of modern science, but rather about the relationship between his views and those of his group, i.e., his teachers, contemporaries, and immediate successors in the sciences.45

For Kuhn, the contextual socio-historical study of scientific communities revealed a ‘continual competition between a number of distinct views of nature’. Although each was at least partially derived from, and roughly compatible with, ‘the dictates of scientific observations and method’, Kuhn argued that each nonetheless evinced ‘incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practicing science in it.’46 He called

46 Ibid., p. 4. Emphasis added. Note that Skinner, in a brief commentary of Kuhn, says that Kuhn’s critique of scientific rationality is reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insistence that attempts to understand ‘facts’ will always be relative to the frameworks of particular lives. Skinner says that this also echoes Quine’s ‘celebrated onslaught’ on certain empiricist dogmas. Further, he says that these influences have flowed together in works such as Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Princeton
these ‘paradigms’, each of which competed with the other(s) for dominance in a process leading eventually to the success of one over its rivals.

In response to critics who saw this leading ultimately to personal and subjective grounds for choosing one theory over another, Kuhn argued that the members of the different communities who subscribed to incommensurable paradigms were not incapable of communicating with each other on a rational basis.\textsuperscript{47} Most importantly, Kuhn’s paradigms were not closed systems of belief and practice, but remained open-ended. If they were not, then the possibility of a scientific revolution – ‘the successive transition from one paradigm to another’ – would scarcely be possible. These qualifications amount to a significant modification of the notion of incommensurability as one might normally understand it as implying such a radical disjunction of ideas that communication is virtually impossible. Instead, Kuhn’s formulation leaves open not simply the possibility of commensuration, but almost its inevitability.

Another important contributor to these debates in the philosophy of science, Paul Feyerabend, was very much drawn to the historicism of Butterfield, quoting him in the opening lines of his best known work, \textit{Against Method}, to the effect that history was replete with ‘accidents and conjunctures and curious juxtapositions of events’ that demonstrate the complexity of human change and the unpredictable character of the ultimate consequences of any given act or decision.\textsuperscript{48} Feyerabend went on to say that his own conception of incommensurability is similar, but not the same as Kuhn’s – for whereas the latter’s is historical his own is abstract. Whether abstract or not, Feyerabend was clearly influenced by historicist ideas as well as those more explicitly concerned with cultural difference in terms of perception and ‘mental sets’. His principle target was the assumed rationality of science as well as the arrogance of certain ‘Western’ cultural assumptions underpinning it. Unsurprisingly, then, he drew on analogies based in anthropological theories of cultural difference in formulating his own incommensurability thesis.\textsuperscript{49}

Subsequent criticisms, however, led Feyerabend to abandon the explicit relativism of his initial stance and a later edition of his key text contains a postscript noting this change. Here, he rejects relativism as a dogma that is as untenable as its ‘cantankerous twin’, absolutism (understood as objective truth, or at least a claim to it).\textsuperscript{50} Feyerabend goes on to suggest an approach to ‘traditions’ (akin to paradigms) which also highlights the possibility of commensuration. Noting first that traditions are capable of

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 199. However, Kuhn later says that: ‘Two men who perceive the same situation differently but nevertheless employ the same vocabulary in its discussion must be using words differently. They speak, that is, from what I have called incommensurable viewpoints. How can they even talk together much less to be persuasive’. Ibid., p. 200. This appears to contradict his earlier argument that incommensurability does not preclude rational discussion. Interestingly, in further discussion, Kuhn slips into some anthropological and linguistic metaphors: ‘To translate a theory or worldview into one’s own language is not to make it one’s own. For that one must \textit{go native}, discover that one is thinking and working in, not simply translating out of, a language that was previously foreign.’ Ibid., p. 204, emphasis added.


\textsuperscript{49} See Ibid., pp. 165, 188-92, 211-13, 262-3.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 269.
interacting in an open fashion, he says that the participants can ‘get immersed into each other’s way of thinking, feeling, perceiving to such an extent that their ideas, perceptions, world-views may be entirely changed – they become different people participating in a new and different tradition.’\(^51\) Again this suggests that from a position of apparent incommensurability participants may engage in a process of commensuration leading to a meeting of minds in a new paradigm. Thus where radical disjunctions or intransigent discontinuities once appeared as given, genuine linkages and continuities may be forged.

The possibility of commensuration has been addressed most explicitly in a recent work by Fred D’Agostino. Noting first that standards are the primary locus of incommensurability, he goes on to argue that the incommensurability of standards is neither fixed nor given, and that it can always be overcome by a suitable project of commensuration.\(^52\) D’Agostino argues further that incommensurability has too often been treated as a metaphysical issue while its temporal dimension has gone largely unappreciated. He therefore advocates a historicized approach to commensuration which asks: ‘Under what circumstances does incommensurability appear and how, specifically, and concretely, is it dealt with in those circumstances.’\(^53\) Furthermore, if a pre-existing basis for commensuration does not already exist, it does not follow that one cannot be constructed.\(^54\)

The key point emerging from the foregoing discussion is that those philosophers best known for introducing the concept into historicized modes of enquiry have not posited closed paradigms, traditions or systems of thought and invoked a rigid incommensurability thesis to keep them closed. D’Agostino’s recent work shows more explicitly how projects of commensuration can work (although success cannot be guaranteed). As far as normative theory is concerned, this further suggests that even if moral standards are understood to emerge from and are contained within entities such as ‘paradigms’, ‘traditions’, ‘epochs’ or ‘cultures’, they need not remain so. In other words, moral standards, values and ideas can – and often have been – subject to processes of commensuration which makes it possible for them to travel in time and space. Indeed, the very notion of common morality depends in one way or another on the possibility of commensuration.

While discussions along these lines, at least in the literature on normative international theory, have most often been concerned with the possibility of commensuration between different groups designated as ‘cultural’, projects of commensuration are just as important between communities or groups located in different temporal spheres, as the next section shows.

**Linking Past, Present and Future**

Although most subscribe to some idea of common morality among humans – frequently expressed in (but not limited to) the concept of human rights – disagreement over how common morality is to be founded or framed is ongoing. Certainly, the universality of any given conception of human rights, and indeed of what it is to be human, remains open to challenge. This is accompanied by problems of who is entitled to set the

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\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., p. 34. Note, however, that it can work in the opposite direction as well, and that elements which once seemed commensurate or commensurable can be rendered incommensurable. See p. 41.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 128.
‘universal’ standards against which actions in breach of human rights are judged, and then who does the judging in any given case. At a practical level, this may eventually be achieved by the establishment of an effective international human rights regime. But philosophical questions concerning the basis on which such a regime can be based, or ought to be based, remain, especially in an era in which so much scholarship has sought to undermine, or at least problematize, ‘Western’ standards for evaluation, there is a strong temptation to endorse culturalist solutions. This would require abandoning with the quest for the holy grail of universality and vesting the ability to set standards, and to judge actions by those standards, in particular social groups.

This strategy obviously accords with the methodological and normative framework of cultural relativism noted above. Methodologically, it is held that one’s own standards, which are invariably determined subjectively, may simply make no sense in another cultural context where different – perhaps incommensurable – standards apply. This is commonly accompanied by a normative injunction: one ought not to judge others by one’s own (subjective) standards. Thus the methodological claim gives rise to a normative claim which holds that each ‘culture’ has the right to formulate standards according to their own particular subjectivities, live by them, judge breaches of them according to their own procedures, and mete out appropriate punishments. This amounts to a case for the moral sovereignty of ‘cultural contexts’ which in turn accords with mainstream communitarian approaches to normative international theory. It also accords with traditional IR theory, at least to the extent that states constitute the essential containers of discrete cultures.55

While this approach has its merits, it also has some major flaws, as numerous proponents of cosmopolitanism have pointed out. One significant problem, as with almost any relativistic formulation, is one of coherence. To award cultural communities the ‘right’ to set their own standards and make moral judgements accordingly, is to invoke a universal right applicable to communities designated as ‘cultural’ and which therefore logically transcends their subjectivities. A second problem attends the definition of ‘cultural community’. This requires that ‘culture’ itself is conceptualized in traditional anthropological terms as an identifiable cluster of beliefs, rules, practices, artifacts and so on which, taken together, both define the community and constitute its context. The tendency to reification strengthens as the community becomes identical with ‘its’ culture, and indeed becomes known as a culture. This conception is distinguishable from culture as a dynamic process which involves not the culture of a group, but processes of interaction at many different levels both within and between groups. To explain further, the former conceptualization underpins notions of communities as unique, bounded, self-referential entities effectively constituting a context which thereafter contains the limits of intersubjectivity. And while it may be allowed that the constituent elements and the boundaries of such communities can shift and change, the focus is still on the the community and its culture. Thus culture is understood almost wholly in terms of discrete communities. This gives rise to a third problem, and that concerns the matter of relations between communities. Put simply, it is difficult to theorize a politically, socially and economically dynamic world based on a

model which posits discrete cultural communities as described above, for it does not provide an adequate basis for the theorization of relations which traverse putative cultural boundaries (often understood as national boundaries) and the contexts they are assumed to constitute. Rather, it can only accommodate a very thin theory of co-existence. But if culture is understood as a dynamic process rather than a reified entity, then different and very important possibilities for intersubjectivity emerge. Culture understood in more dynamic terms implies not just a set of practices and beliefs confined to discrete communities or contexts (although this may be one aspect of culture), but a set of relations, practices and intersubjectivities that extend within, between and across a multiplicity of communities. Culture in this sense is no longer a property of discrete communities, but a dynamic that enables the building of relations across the plurality of human communities, an approach which better meets the requirements of contemporary world politics where the emphasis is on the transcending of traditional boundaries, including the boundaries assumed by traditional approaches to the conceptualization of culture.⁵⁶

To date, cosmopolitan critiques of communitarian approaches have concentrated almost exclusively on problems generated by cultural contextualism. Having said that, technical analyses of context/contextualism, or of incommensurability, seem not to have featured explicitly in these critiques, appearing rather as a sub-text. Further, the implications of historical contextualism appear to have gone almost completely unnoticed. I suggest, however, that this is at least as important for international normative theory as cultural contextualism has been. To illustrate, let us consider the matter in relation to human rights which is a concern not just with respect to infringements or abuses in the here and now, but in the past and in the future as well. Two examples involving prominent issues serve to illustrate.

Case I: The Continuity of Historic Injustices
One phenomenon of considerable political significance in contemporary world politics concerns apologies for historic injustices. This phenomenon has occurred in the ‘age of rights’ which emerged in the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War.⁵⁷ It is supported through the international human rights regime which has attempted to set standards of behaviour for the international community. The intention of the regime is largely preventive, and in this sense is present- (and to some extent future-) oriented, but the phenomenon of apologies by state or other relevant actors for past wrongs which emerges from this general normative framework reflects a remedial concern which, by definition, links the past to the present. While some instances of contemporary apologetics may seem rather pointless – for example, apologies by the Pope for the Crusades – the recognition of past injustice embodied in apologies for historical wrongs has great significance for others with experience of actual harm and for whom the past is palpably continuous with the present.

One case in international politics concerns Japan’s troubled ‘War Memories’ and its enmeshment in an ongoing politics of apology, especially with its near neighbours in East Asia. The range of atrocities attributed to Japanese military forces in the Second

⁵⁶ For a more detailed discussion see Lawson, *Culture and Context.*
World war is extensive, but two cases have featured regularly as subjects of official apologies in recent years: first, the ‘Rape of Nanking’ in which around 300,000 men, women and children are estimated (by Chinese authorities) to have perished, with more than 20,000 women raped; and second, the forced sexual slavery of ‘comfort women’ particularly, although not exclusively, in Korea. The evidence from a variety of sources – eye-witness accounts, diaries, official documentation, photographic records, and so on – show that there was a lot to apologize for. The apologies and expressions of sincere regret issued by successive Japanese governments over the last few decades, however, have been countered by periodic episodes within Japan revolving largely around the representation of war history in school textbooks authorized by the government, and the remembrance of war dead by public figures.

The politics of apologetics in Japan lends itself readily to collective or social memory analysis, a genre that has achieved particular prominence in cultural history. At its simplest level, the idea of collective memory consists in ‘the ways in which people construct a sense of the past’ through shared cultural knowledge as embodied in books, films, museums, commemorations and so forth. Richard Ned Lebow has recently linked the rise of memory studies more generally, and the notion that memory is highly malleable and contested, to a burgeoning of counterfactual history, both academic and popular. Popular counterfactual history, he says, is premised on the notion that the present is highly contingent and that with only ‘minimal rewrites’ (Weber’s term), very different presents can be conjured up. He goes on to point out that more scholarly efforts ‘have sought to undermine essentialist narratives and counteract the certainty of hindsight bias’ as well as ‘to expose the generally unspoken assumptions on which historical interpretations are based and, by extension, the identities they support.’

While there is little doubt that the interpretation of the past is highly malleable, and that the present is clearly contingent in the sense that things could have turned out differently, it is another thing altogether to say that ‘historical truth’ exists only as an act of interpretation in the present, invariably compromised by the play of specific contemporary interests. In contrast, I suggest that certain historical truths concerning Japan’s war past, while perhaps grasped only imperfectly and indirectly, have a tangible

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60 Alan Confino, ‘Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,’ *American Historical Review* (December/1997), p. 1386. All these have featured in the remembering, and forgetting, of Japan’s war past and its representation in the present. It should be stressed, however, that although the international press generally focuses on the rhetoric of Japanese nationalists and the behaviour of leading conservative politicians in worshiping at the notorious Yasukuni shrine where several war criminals have been interred, the majority of Japanese are by no means in denial of the uglier aspects of the country’s war history. War memories within Japan are deeply contested and so it is not simply a case of an obdurate Japanese nation failing to come to terms with an unpleasant part of its history by failing to face up to ‘the facts’. This suggests, among other things, that the idea of ‘collective memory’ rendered as a singular construct is difficult to maintain.

reality that persist continuously from past to present, not least in the form of the lived experiences of surviving ‘comfort women’. To argue otherwise is unsustainable on two counts.

First, it is methodologically suspect because it requires a form of contextualism which posits a radical disjunction between past and present in accordance with a flawed notion of incommensurability. Second, it is normatively insupportable because it effectively equalizes all versions of the past, including those in denial of war crimes. One consequence is an escape clause which allows the evasion of moral responsibility for the past, a failure which scarcely does justice to those whose personal experience links past, present and future. For them, historical truth matters more deeply than most can imagine, and its denial is an ongoing source of pain.

‘True’ history for the survivors is therefore experienced in the present as a reality that is at once both past and present, manifest as lived personal and shared experience which is carried forward to the future. The act of apology in these circumstances is not merely an enactment of a particular version of ‘collective memory’, but an act of public recognition of, and collective responsibility for, the truth of a past wrong and its ongoing consequences. Disavowing responsibility for the past is indeed to treat it as a foreign country, bounded as a sovereign moral space, rather than part of one’s own moral universe.

Case II: Present Practice and Future Harm
The second example concerns not past human rights abuses, but possible future harm generated by actions in the present. One of the most obvious fields of activity in the present that is very likely to cause considerable harm in the future is the consumption of non-renewable, carbon-based resources which will almost certainly result, among other things, in long-term damage to the global environment through adverse climate change and possibly a scarcity of resources (food, water, energy) which may in turn result in large-scale suffering among future generations. The weight of scientific (and other) opinion at present strongly endorses both the fact that significant climate change is occurring, and that it is likely to have deleterious effects on future generations. Although we do not know exactly what those effects may be for any given population group, there is a strong consensus that action in the present to try and prevent or ameliorate future environmental damage, and therefore harm to future people, that will be caused by both past and present industrial production and energy consumption, is a moral imperative based on some notion of inter-generational justice. This imperative is clearly manifest in policy responses such as the Kyoto Protocol and various other instruments both national and international.

This leads to some interesting questions on the normative status of people who do not (yet) exist. This question is essentially metaphysical. Can they actually hold rights as we understand them? And if not ‘rights’ as such, do we have obligations and responsibilities nonetheless? The weight of serious philosophical discussion seems to be work in favour of an affirmative response. Robert Elliot, for example, shows that even if we concede the metaphysical claim that people who do not exist cannot actually bear

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62 See, for example, Donald P. Spence, ‘Saying Goodbye to Historical Truth’, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 21 (2), 1991: 245-252

63 Cite Barry, Singer, Rawls.
rights, this does not mean that future people will not come to have rights. We have every reason to believe that future people will exist, at least in the foreseeable future. Their rights may well be contingent on their existence, but the fact that future people will come into being, and can then actually bear rights, 'provides the basis for a normative isomorphism between future people and present people.'

If we once again consider the logic of a radical historical contextualism in both methodological and normative terms, however, it seems to work against this. To reiterate, if methodological contextualism requires a disjunction between past and present, then it follows logically that a similar disjunction exists between present and future. And if we cannot judge the past by the standards of the present, how can we ‘impose’ what we consider to be right and proper, say in the way of rights as we understand them now, on future generations. According to the logic of historical contextualism, they will have different notions of ‘rights’, including their own right to a life worth living as well as what it means to live such a life. Thus we have no reason to suppose that our standards, values and concerns can be simply projected forward into the future. Indeed the logic of historical contextualism enjoins us not to. For if it is an irredeemably presentist error to project our values and concerns back into the past, it is equally so to project these forward to the future where ways of being will, in Lowenthal’s terms, be incommensurable with our own. If this does not entirely lay waste the grounds for assuming responsibility for the future, and some measure of accountability for it, the conjunction of anti-presentism, the emphasis on discontinuity in history and the more superficial incommensurability theses go a long way towards it.

Conclusion
The paper began by noting the conventional attributions of states in the discipline of IR and competing ideas about the extent to which ‘foreignness’ mediates the normative status of these entities. It went on to draw explicit attention to certain highly influential notions developed in historiography which, broadly speaking, treat the past as a ‘foreign country’. This logically raises questions about the status of the future and the implications for normative theory. The paper proceeded to make a case for an approach to historical development emphasizing continuities between past, present and future in both methodological and normative terms. This entails, among other things, rising above the level of micro-historical concerns and what is arguably an over-emphasis on specificity and particularity and extending the perspective to much longer-term developments, as exemplified in contemporary historical sociology and in notions of path dependence and counterfactual history. These latter approaches contain possibilities barely explored in

65 The political theorist John Dunn, who is generally included among the Cambridge historical contextualists, addresses at least tangentially the question of responsibility for the future, apparently abandoning any notion that ‘contexts’ exist historically as morally self-contained entities. First denouncing ethical relativism, at least as it applies to cultural formations, as ‘a psychic debility which fully merits the contempt which history is certain to visit upon it’, Dunn goes on immediately to suggest that ‘if we cannot escape responsibility for the future which we are [now] making simply by abandoning the practice of moral self-assessment, it is still necessary to consider the question of how it is now rational to seek to make a better future.’ Unfortunately it is not clear exactly what he means by this, nor whether he is now making a case for abandoning the implicit moral relativism of contextualist methodology in history, or working his way around it in terms of the future by deploying rationalist grounds. See John Dunn, Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979p. 107.
this paper, but which may well prove invaluable in re-orienting ideas about the relationship between history, IR and normative theory as well as focusing more attention on the future as a site for more serious attention.

Many of these issues have not yet been dealt by normative international theorists, and certainly not in the terms discussed in this paper. The problem of ‘presentism’, for example, excoriated so roundly by historians from Butterfield to Skinner and the present generation of cultural historians, pervades the whole question of the normative relationship between past, present and future, and the responsibility of any present generation for both the past and the future. Any normative project addressing this issue, and the question of commensurability that is implied in it, however, can scarcely escape an accusation of presentism, since the concerns of any such a project are invariably linked to particular norms, values, interests and so on that are irredeemably current. But this is not necessarily a problem. Questions then emerge concerning not just whose values and interests are at stake but whose version of the past (say, in the case of Japan’s war memories) or the future (as in the case of global climate change) does the evidence support as more plausible? These questions do require that we sit in judgement on the evidence. That we do so from the present and in terms of present moral concerns can scarcely be avoided, but this is not to say that these judgements are necessarily wrong.

As I have argued elsewhere, to accept the logic of a thoroughgoing historical contextualism is to accept that we can offer no moral judgements about the behaviour of any historic community from the standpoint of the present, which is to say that there are no firm grounds on which to launch effective moral criticisms of past acts of genocide, slavery, colonialism and indigenous dispossession, and therefore no grounds for accountability or responsibility for past acts in the present.66 We do judge these acts now, and we judge them to be morally wrong for good reason. As for the future, the issue of accountability may seem much more difficult, but this is no cause for evasion. In a call to her colleagues in the discipline of anthropology (and the social sciences more generally), to face up to the implications of their work not just for the past and present, but for the next century and beyond, Carolyn Nordstrom has posed some serious questions concerning the extent to which scholars must recognize that their work not only illuminates the past and shapes the present but also produces the future67. This insight is shared by IR scholars at the more critical end of the theoretical spectrum who do recognize the extent to which theory is not merely the means by which we construct particular interpretations of reality, but has a very significant role in how reality is produced.68 Apart from the perennial question of how we can best produce moral judgements (rather than avoiding them), the question for normative theorists is what kind of future is their own work capable of producing and what kind of future would they be willing to take responsibility for?