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Political Studies and the Contextual Turn: A Methodological/Normative Critique¹

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Introduction

As part of the broader 'cultural turn' in the human sciences, developments in political studies in recent years have seen much greater attention paid to ideas about history, culture and associated notions of context. This reflects a dissatisfaction with the strictures of positivism and modernist empiricism and an interest in alternative methodologies and epistemologies. In their study of British governance, for example, Bevir and Rhodes repudiate the former approaches on the grounds that they 'postulate given facts divorced from theoretical contexts.' Their own work, by contrast, adopts an explicit anti-foundationalism which assumes that all perceptions, and hence 'facts', arise 'within the context of a prior set of beliefs or theoretical commitments.' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 3).² In a later article, an interpretive approach is said to lead to the conclusion that 'our practices are radically contingent [and] lack a fixed essence or given path of development.' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005, p. 171). More recently, a collection of essays by leading scholars on various aspects of contextual political analysis aims to show that 'how political processes actually work and what outcomes they produce depend heavily on the contexts within which they occur.' (Goodin and Tilly, 2006, p. 4). Here the editors note that their own stress on context goes very much against the grain of a political science aiming to identify general laws that hold good across time and place (Goodin and Tilly, 2006, p. 20). They do not, however, set up their project in such direct opposition to positivist explanatory strategies. While rejecting both the latter's excessive parsimony as well as exaggerated versions of postmodernism, they propose a middle path leading to an appreciation of how the study of context and contextual effects contribute to systematic description and explanation (Goodin and Tilly, 2006, p. 6).

Critics of positivist International Relations (IR) have also accused its practitioners of demarcating the field of study in overly narrow terms, limiting the tools of research, marginalizing normative concerns as 'unscientific', and isolating IR from the broader human sciences. Some have drawn particular attention to positivist IR's ahistoricism and its lack of attention to developments in the history of political thought which have highlighted the importance of methodological contextualism (Bell, 2001, pp. 115-116; see also Buzan and Little, 2000; Holden, 2002, pp. 253-270). Realists, in particular, stand accused of continuing to quote selected passages from figures such as Thucydides and Hobbes 'as if, stripped of their context, they could unproblematically speak to current concerns.' (Bell, 2001, p. 116; see also Welch, 2003; Lawson, G. 2006). Others have argued that both liberals and realists tend to project a homogeneous form of human subjectivity across time and place which ignores the contingency and the diversity of human beliefs and practices. And where the concept of culture is considered at all, it has either been treated as ultimately determined by other, material or non-cultural factors, or relegated to the realm of the domestic and thus bracketed off from an international sphere

defined exclusively by the structure of the international system of states and the dynamics of anarchy (Steinmetz, 1999; Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996).

There is much to be welcomed in the turn away from an ahistorical, objectivist and materialist positivism towards more nuanced approaches to political studies. Contingency attends virtually every development in human affairs, making predictability a very inexact science. An almost infinite array of 'variables' feed into outcomes which can range from the particular personalities of influential figures to weather patterns during periods of warfare. And facts simply do not speak for themselves. They are made to speak in different ways by different people located in varying positions of power and influence and with particular agendas or projects. Thus the notion that satisfactory explanations of political practices and actions can be obtained in the absence of a narrative account of the beliefs that sustain them is indeed difficult to defend. Even so, critiques which substitute specific historical and/or cultural 'contexts' for universals may turn out to be simply using another method of objectification and generating other problems. So while agreeing with the general point that attention to context is essential to good political analysis, and that positivist methodologies often tell us little about why things actually turn out the way they do in politics, the analysis is critical of key aspects of contextualism.³

Some may well ask what is new in all this, or whether just another recycling of the *methodenstreit*, which each generation of scholars is condemned to repeat. It seems, however, that there are endless nuances to be explored and I hope to raise at least one or two new points by looking in more detail at the notion of context in both historical and cultural terms. This interest has been prompted in part by the extent to which contemporary language throughout the humanities and social sciences is replete with contextualist signifiers. Indeed, the invocation of specificity, particularity and contingency seems to have become *de rigueur*. As one commentator notes, in addition to the lack of enthusiasm for the study of universals in the humanities today, 'the focus of both theory and practice tends to be on "difference", "cultural and historical specificity," and so on.' (Hogan, 1997, p. 223). This observation highlights a tendency for authors to invoke both cultural *and* historical specificity in the same breathe, or to simply conflate them,⁴ all of which may seem innocuous enough. But 'historical context' and 'cultural context' are not the same.⁵ Further, as the analysis below shows, there is an important contradiction between historical contextualism and cultural contextualism – a contradiction that seems to have passed unnoticed by both contextualists and their critics but which has implications for the possibility of a general theory of context.⁶ The discussion also considers certain normative issues in the culturalist formulation of communitarianism and in the politics of recognition/difference. Far from providing a critique of domination, I suggest that key aspects of the turn to culture in this latter genre of study actually reinforce it.

Finally, I hope to address a problem which also touches on the broader arena of public discourse. In this latter sphere, academics have been accused of over-zealous efforts in debunking notions of truth, creating in turn an intellectual culture 'in which the middle ground between shoulder-shrugging relativism and dogmatic fundamentalism has been vacated'. (Baggini, 2007, p. 29). While the tendency to embrace either/or solutions is also sometimes exaggerated for effect, I suggest that the middle ground is often undervalued or inadequately defended. The conclusion therefore points readers in the direction of a research agenda that rejects the logic of either a pure universalism or a pure

contextualism in underpinning norms and methods, and re-states the importance of a middle ground capable of accommodating a plurality of approaches to political studies.⁷

The Cultural Turn

Contextualism has close affinities with the cultural turn, a diffuse intellectual movement originating in an earlier 'linguistic turn' which has challenged orthodoxies concerning the possibility of objective, universal knowledge and the methods through it is purportedly obtained, emphasizing instead the contingent nature of all social knowledge and the specificity of the contexts in which it is produced.⁸ The exact concept of 'culture' on which the cultural turn is based is not altogether clear but it is a term which, 'without necessarily specifying anything, carries the full weight of all possible forms of specificity.' (Gallagher, 1992, p. 81). The alliance of culture with ideas of contextual specificity links it closely to anthropological ideas. Indeed, since proponents of the cultural turn repudiate notions of universal sameness, the differentiating and relativizing properties of anthropology's 'master concept', at least as developed in American cultural anthropology, have seemed eminently suitable. Geertz's pioneering work in symbolic/interpretive analysis has had a particularly important impact. Having famously proposed that 'man' must be understood as an 'animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun for himself' and that culture 'consists in those webs', Geertz went on to propose that the study of culture is 'not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.' (Geertz, 1975, p. 5).

The notion of culture in Geertz's interpretive anthropology has been influential in political studies too. Bevir and Rhodes, as we have seen, adopt a very explicit interpretive approach while for a recent study of the 'cultural construction of international relations', Geertzian anthropology has provided the entire conceptual framework (Jahn, 200, pp. 2-3). A major IR textbook defines culture in wholly anthropological terms (Murden, 2005, pp. 539-553) while much the same applies in culturalist approaches to strategic studies.⁹ In comparative politics, as well as in the study of national polities, the key concept is 'political culture', a notion originally formulated by Almond and Verba (1963) and also based largely on anthropological ideas. The epistemological and normative affinities of the contextualist school in the history of ideas (aka the 'Cambridge school') place it well within the broader cultural turn as well. And as we shall see, where the idea of 'culture' itself is explicitly invoked, here too it is an anthropological notion. One significant problem is that wherever the culture concept has been deployed in political studies, it has usually reflected a quite reified conception which has tended to cast it as tightly bounded, so that 'cultures' map onto peoples and then often onto places as well (Ballinger, 2006. p. 348).

The broader field of cultural studies introduces a number of further complexities regarding the conceptualization of culture. It has some connections with the humanist formulation of Matthew Arnold, generally dismissed by anthropologists for its apparent elitism. However, cultural studies now embraces a thoroughgoing egalitarianism acquired through subsequent association with Marxian principles as well as through interaction with anthropological ideas. The Marxian associations also link it to contemporary Critical Theory which seeks to reveal the social and political embeddedness of theoretical postulations while highlighting the ideological contours of domination as a necessary preface to a project of emancipation (Linklater, 1996, p. 279). Critical theory is generally

more alert to the fact that considerations of ‘context’ must therefore include attention to the dynamics of power which reside in constructs such as ‘culture’. In normative terms, this is where most versions of the cultural turn are most deficient. Yet it is precisely the point at which a genuinely critical form of contextualism has so much to contribute. By drawing attention to the ways in which a concept (such as culture itself), is given a certain interpretation in a certain context, a more critical contextualism has the potential to highlight the ways in which power expresses itself – namely, through the interpretation of concepts in ways which both reflect and support power. However, the concept of ‘context’ itself is no straightforward matter either, as the next section shows.

Context and Contextualism

‘Context’ is defined simply as ‘that which environs the object of our interest and helps by its relevance to explain it’. (Scharfstein, 1989, p. 1). And if context is to be understood as that which surrounds a given political phenomenon, it must be distinguishable from the phenomenon itself (Collier and Mazzuca, 2006, p. 474). The most common form of the contextualist thesis is primarily linguistic because it maintains that ‘knowing’ something is context-sensitive to the extent that truth-value depends on the context in which any given claim to truth is situated (Brady and Pritchard, 2005, p. 161). Put another way, the truth-value of an utterance which includes the word ‘know’ or its cognates varies according to whatever purposes, intentions, expectations, presuppositions, and so on, that the speaker possess. (Cohen, 1999, p. 57). Knowledge is thus ‘situated’ in a context, and it follows that meaning can only be elicited through understanding the context.

Contextualism is also partly subsumed under the broader meaning of relativism. The latter is broader because a notion of ‘environment’ is not required – objects, ideas, beliefs and so on can simply be relative to each other independently of any particular environment (Scharfstein, 1989, pp. 1-2). Numerous thinkers have contributed to theory-building around the idea of situated knowledge. Gadamer’s hermeneutics, for example, has shown how certain interpretive principles may be applied in relation to contexts. In turn, Gadamer has drawn extensively on the work of earlier figures, especially Dilthey, who reformulated the older interpretive principle of understanding the parts of a text – which in earlier periods meant the Bible – in terms of the whole text, and extending that whole to the total historical reality in which the individual historical document was embedded (Gadamer, 1975, pp. 155-156).

Methodological contextualism therefore denotes the study of how contexts explain, and regards explanation as ‘impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into account.’ (Scharfstein, 1989). However, a paradox emerges when the logical consequences are followed through. As Collier and Mazzuca (2006, p. 475) point out, analysts may risk misunderstanding the political phenomena located within a context by underestimating the latter’s salience, but if direct causality is attributed to context, it becomes annulled since it is then an integral part of the phenomenon itself, rather than its ‘surrounding’. Although awareness of context is manifest in many practical ways, and is now consciously deployed by proponents of the cultural turn and others opposed to positivist methodologies and assumptions, as noted above, there is no actual theory of context. As Scharfstein (1989, p. 3) points out, there are no rules concerning how it is applied or what its limits may be. But these are not the only problems, as we shall see shortly.

It should come as no surprise that contextualism has very close associations with anthropology too: ‘Ever since Malinowski, anthropologists have chanted the mantra of “placing social and cultural phenomena in context”, an analytical strategy adopted to throw light on, and indeed make some sort of authentic sense of, ethnographic material.’ (Dilley, 1999, p. 1). But it is the German-American cultural anthropologist, Franz Boas, and his students, who are generally regarded as developing the most thoroughgoing commitment to a methodological contextualism which in turn underpins a normative commitment to relativism (Hyatt, 1990, pp. 20-21; Lawson 2006, pp. 90-97). Boas’s contextualism is illustrated in part through his approach to museum exhibits. By arranging an exhibit of artefacts holistically by tribe or group rather than by classes of objects across different cultural formations, one learns to appreciate the group’s ‘culture’ in its totality and, most importantly, in its own terms. This highlights the relativity of different groups through demonstrating the uniqueness of each ‘context’ which can only be represented holistically. Contextualism is also prominent in Geertz’s interpretive anthropology which draws explicitly on hermeneutics as well as on the Parsonian formulation of culture as a system of meanings to be understood *in its own terms* (Barnard and Spencer, 1998, pp. 535-539). Although anthropological ideas and theories about culture vary considerably, from those of the Boasian school – which itself evinced much variety – to the later interpretive strategies of Geertz and many others as well, virtually all approaches to cultural anthropology have contributed to the highly influential notion of culture *as context*.¹⁰

Historical contextualism appears to have much in common with the cultural (anthropological) version, although the referents ‘history’ and ‘culture’ suggest different starting points. Historical contextualism is sometimes subsumed under the broader rubric of historicism which, for present purposes, denotes a theory of meaning in which past acts and events are presented not in isolation, but in the correct context from which they emanated (Boucher, 1985, p. 13). As a methodology, then, it requires, first, that the matters under investigation be placed within their own particular temporal setting, and that the researcher should proceed without assuming conceptual continuities over time (Kelley, 2002, p. 3). The method therefore requires the recovery or reconstruction of the context within which past events occurred and/or historical documents or texts were produced. Without this, we cannot really grasp the meaning of any given historical text. As Bevir explains, this form of contextualism proposes that the meanings available to authors at any given time depend on the ways of thinking, writing and speaking that were accessible to them. It follows that authors such as Thucydides, Machiavelli or Hobbes, could only utilize whatever concepts were available to them within their own social or linguistic communities and that these embodied very particular, socially transmitted assumptions about the world (Bevir, 1999, p. 34). On this account, it may be argued that the funeral speech of Pericles extolling the virtues of the Athenian people (as composed by Thucydides), or Machiavelli’s exhortation to Italians to unite, cannot be read as ‘nationalist’ tracts, because the specific modern concepts associated with the ideology of nationalism were unavailable to them.

A number of prominent historians and theorists have been closely associated with historical contextualism (e.g. Pocock, 1967; Dunn, 1980), but Quentin Skinner is generally regarded as the principal figure, indeed, the ‘supreme apostle’ of historical contextualism (Young, 2004, p. 361; see also Holden, 2002). Skinner’s major influences

include Wittgenstein's linguistic pragmatics and the speech act theory of Austin, Searle and Grice (see Tully 1998, p. 8). One of Skinner's principal arguments is that neglect of context by historians of ideas has encouraged simplistic caricatures of past thinkers and/or unwarranted moralistic postures with respect to their alleged shortcomings, and that such postures are based on contemporary standards rather than those of the period in which the texts were produced. He further proposes that by recovering the context within which historical texts were actually written, we can study the meaning and intentions of the author without obscuring the picture with our own prejudices (see Skinner, 1988, pp. 30-67).

This position is comparable to the contextualism of cultural anthropology and indeed treats any given historical context in much the same way as 'a culture'. Skinner refers explicitly to a 'mythology of parochialism' in historiography – a danger common to 'any kind of attempt to understand an alien culture' (Skinner, 1988, p. 45), and further points to the error that historians may commit in terms of conceptualizing arguments in ways that dissolve their alien elements into a misleading familiarity, a danger which he notes is pre-eminent in anthropology (Skinner, 1988, p. 47). In addition, he clearly links a correct methodological approach with a correct normative stance which replicates the anthropological injunction against judging 'other' cultures using the standards of one's own or those of some spurious universal standard. In a recent, highly favourable appraisal of Skinner's work and its relevance for the disciplinary history of IR, another commentator endorses his methods as applicable to *both* historically *and* culturally 'distant' work (Holden, 2002, p. 264).

David Lowenthal's equally influential depiction of the past as 'a foreign country' also explicitly joins the concerns of historians with those of anthropologists. Both, he suggests, are studying 'foreign ways'. Lowenthal argues further that: '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.' (Lowenthal, 1985, p. xvi). The invocation of incommensurability here, then, suggests not just a discontinuity between past and present, but a radical disjunction – a point also made in relation to Skinnerian contextualism (see Runciman, 2001, p. 90).¹¹

Many critiques of historical contextualism are equally applicable to cultural contextualism – hardly surprising since they evidently share much common ground. Common criticisms range from the simple point that to place things in context in order to understand them is a simple truism, to the more serious problem of an infinite regress of texts and contexts which renders methodological contextualism procedurally impossible: 'Contexts, once formulated, become subject to the same process, i.e. they themselves become texts and will in turn be placed "in context"'. (King, 2000: 185). Other critical responses take issue with the contextualists' general dismissal of the idea that the great texts in the canon of historical political thought should not be read as though written to instruct future generations – namely us – and certainly not in politics and morality. Runciman (2001, p. 85) summarizes historical contextualist reasoning on this point (while not endorsing it): '[T]he central texts in the history of political thought cannot have been written to instruct us because their authors knew nothing of us or what we might need instructing in.' Thus scholars have been urged to stop reading Thucydides for the purpose of 'bending him to our will by making him speak to debates about which he

would understand little and care even less.’ (Welch, 2003, p. 302). This, however, flies in the face of Thucydides’ own stated purpose: ‘My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever.’ (Thucydides, 1972, I, 48). A further rejoinder that has proved especially durable to arguments of this kind highlights the essentially negative inferences to be drawn, including the ultimate ‘irrelevance of genuine historical research to the business of addressing contemporary problems of morality and politics.’ (Runciman, 2001, p. 86).

Methodological contextualists also stand accused of a ‘vicious relativism’ if ‘human nature is made to vary empirically with historical context.’ (Hollis, 1998, p. 146). In response, Skinner argues 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 and that unlike a conceptual relativist, he is not trying to offer a definition of truth at all (Skinner, 1988, pp. 255-56). But if meaning is relative to context, which is what contextualism establishes as a methodological rule and which is linked in turn to a distinct normative position, it is hard to escape the inference that contextualism is relativism by another name, and with similar epistemological *and* normative consequences. For if one endorses the uniqueness of historical moments, a move which clearly implies the impossibility of judging past thoughts and deeds from the normative standpoint of the present, the relativist implications are clear (see Diggins, 1984, pp. 151-169; King, 2000, p. 209). Similar points have been made in relation to cultural contextualism/ relativism on numerous occasions.

We may also recall here the argument that authors such as Thucydides or Machiavelli cannot be read as nationalists because the specific modern concepts associated with nationalism were unavailable to them. Here is where contextualism has a valuable point to make, for it is indeed anachronistic to make such authors speak as nationalists. However, it is another thing altogether to say that their ideas are ‘incommensurable’ with later ideas about nations and nationalism. Yet this is what is clearly implied by those contextualists who invoke incommensurability and therefore a radical disjunction between past and present. Arguably, when particularism and the specificity of the past are pushed too far, the errors it seeks to remedy are simply matched by those it commits. If it is an error to say that the past is *always* the same, significantly, as the present, then it is equally erroneous to say that the past is *always* different, significantly, from the present, for this position leads to a fallacious incommensurability thesis of the kind implied by the invocation of *radical* disjunctions, contingencies, and so on. Skinner, Lowenthal, Bevir and Rhodes, and others supporting a variety of contextualist/ interpretive methodologies may not wish to go so far, yet the logic of their arguments press strongly in that direction. This, however, is not the only problem. When we examine related aspects of the logic of historical contextualism alongside cultural contextualism, an interesting contradiction becomes apparent, one which makes a general theory of context encompassing both historical and cultural forms highly problematic.

The Contradictions of Contextualism

We have seen that the contextualist approach to the study of history outlined above insists on the particularity and specificity of the past. We have also seen that historical contextualists have often joined their arguments with those of cultural contextualists by direct reference to ‘alien cultures’ and the notion that ‘the past is a foreign country’.

Furthermore, the invocation of incommensurability suggests not just a discontinuity between past and present, but a radical disjunction. However, the culture concept underpinning the notion of cultural (anthropological) contextualism effectively dissolves the separation of past and present by stressing continuity. To explain further, continuity is essential to cultural contextualism if culture, or cultural traditions, are understood as transmitted from the ancestral past. This is captured by the idea of cultural patrimony defined as ‘a world of shared public meanings ... inherited from the past, developed and contested in the present, and transmitted across the generations to the future.’ (O’Hagan, 1998, pp. 147-157). It is equally reflected in claims that ‘a body of knowledge constitutes “a culture” only to the extent that it is in practice acquired, deemed valuable, and hence conserved and communicated across time by the members of a group.’ (Rigney, 1993, p. 1). And again: ‘Because cultural phenomena exist and are handed down in time, students of the human sciences have to interpret cultural phenomena in terms of historical processes.’ (Bevir, 1999, p. 2).

One communitarian theorist defends a Burkean notion of tradition emphasizing the interpretation and application of ‘virtuous exemplars from history’ which contribute to ‘a historically extended, socially embedded argument about the good of the community whose identity it seeks to define.’ (Bell, 1993, p. 126). This posits a form of cultural contextualism emphasizing the partnership between past and present in terms of specific normative traditions. Thus culture as context reaches back in time through the concept of tradition. It also projects forward to the future through the assumption of ongoing practice associated with the patrimony of that tradition. This is quite at odds with the *discontinuity* emphasized, and indeed demanded, of the type of historical contextualism outlined earlier.

The incompatible logics of the two principal forms of methodological contextualism sketched above is accompanied by their inherent implausibility when posited in an uncompromising form. It is simply not credible to read history as a series of unique moments with no connection between them, as a radical historicist or contextualist position implies. It is similarly implausible to insist, in the name of cultural contextualism, that human communities are utterly unique cultural constructions, placed here or there in different spatial settings, and lacking connections that make them at least potentially comprehensible and meaningful to each other.

Some recent work in IR, while not venturing quite this far along the path of radical contextualism, seem nonetheless to be heading in that general direction by taking pains to emphasize specificity in both historical and cultural terms in opposition to the transcendent universalist premises shared by both realism and liberalism. One commentator suggests that contextualism serves as a general corrective ‘for certain Western biases and assumptions.’ (Dahlberg, 1983, p. 258).¹² This raises the well worn spectre of a West/non-West dichotomy which draws much of its rationale from both cultural and historical forms. As soon as one denounces something called ‘Western theory’ or ‘Western epistemology’, and awards it a cultural and/or historical ‘specificity’, one must assume the existence of a radically different ‘non-West’ underpinned by ‘its’ own specificities. Thus the construction of one assumes the existence of a clearly delineated other. Such crude dichotomous constructions and reifications abound in contemporary culturalist approaches to world politics. They also feed into assumptions about the self-legitimizing nature of ‘culture’ and allied notions of context while often

simply inverting the hierarchies they oppose, thereby privileging local conservative, authoritarian and nationalist ideologies and agendas (see Lawson, 2006, p. 165; see also Halliday, 2005).

The specificity of concepts themselves is another issue. Drawing from both historical sociology and social constructivism, one commentator insists that because the concept of sovereignty developed in the wake of the Westphalian settlement, it is a 'historically and geographically specific', rather than transhistorical concept (Hobden, 1999, p. 407). Other constructivists, however, award the concept of sovereignty a distinctly transhistoric role, positing its existence in such diverse settings as Ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, Absolutist Europe and the Modern Society of States. But it is the values and practices that the concept of sovereignty embodies which are then taken to differ according to historical context, or rather according to the 'unique conception of the moral purpose of the state' which in each case has given it 'a distinctive cultural and historic meaning.' (Reus-Smit, 1999, pp. 6-7). In these examples there is a clear commitment to a notion of context in the conceptualization of sovereignty, since both authors use the language of historical, geographic and/or cultural specificity. But there is no indication of what actually constitutes context. Rather, the very notion of 'context' as referring to historical and/or cultural and/or geographic specificity is simply taken for granted. No attempt is made to think through the implications of invoking specificities or particularities beyond signifying a rather vague epistemological/normative position. Further, their differing approaches demonstrate the problem of specifying just what it is that needs to be contextualized as historically or culturally (or geographically) specific, of distinguishing which elements ought to be taken as constitutive of context, and of actually 'specifying' where one context ends and another begins.

Another recent study of the culture concept in world politics uses 'context' principally in terms of its methodological application in locating texts in the settings in which they were originally produced. In an interesting study, Reeves argues that the contemporary use of 'culture' to refer to specific groups and their different life ways, in an anthropological sense, would have lacked resonance for students of world politics in the early twentieth century who were more familiar with the humanist understanding. She goes on to mount a thoroughgoing critique of the anthropological conception of culture and its influence in contemporary world political studies, arguing instead for the superiority of the humanist conception with its universalist underpinnings. But while clearly rejecting the cultural contextualism associated with anthropology, Reeves nonetheless supports historical contextualism as developed by Skinner and others, and indeed it explicitly underpins her whole approach (Reeves, 2004, pp. 6-7).

Yet another study starts by positing the general contextualist argument that human action cannot be understood when 'ripped out of its sociological, cultural and historical nexus of reference' while dismissing the quest for laws of behaviour and generalizations that are 'independent of cultural and historical accident.' The author goes on to suggest that just as a theory of pragmatics is needed to understand the meaning of words, so a theory of context is needed for understanding international relations (Goertz, 1994, p. 1). He proceeds to formulate notions of context that blend elements of history and culture as well as structural components such as the 'international system' and the 'normative environment' in which states interact (Goertz, 1994, p. 52). Interestingly, despite the explicit criticism of positivism noted above, the study deploys regression analysis,

typologies and algebraic formulae which produces a confusing array of positivist and anti-positivist strategies.

Each of these studies incorporates, in one way or another, some kind of methodological contextualism, at least in so far as they share the language of specificity, particularity and contingency in explicit historical and/or culturalist terms. But they take context as given, frequently conflate historical and cultural specificity, and certainly do not address themselves to the problem of a more general theory of context. Indeed, their varying stances illustrate once again the difficulties of constructing a coherent theory of context.¹³ This is not just a methodological issue but a normative one as well.

Contextualism and Normative Theory

Cultural contextualism has been a prominent theme in communitarian normative theory which in turn supports stronger versions of multiculturalism. 'The community' here is generally characterized as denoting a shared way of life and is assumed to provide the concrete locus within which individuals are embedded and through which they acquire a sense of identity and basic moral beliefs. Parekh's multiculturalist/communitarian approach, for example, emphasizes the cultural embeddedness of humans and asserts that 'moral life is necessarily embedded in and cannot be isolated from the wider culture', and that a way of life can be judged neither good nor bad 'without taking full account of the system of meaning, traditions, temperament and the moral and emotional responses of the people involved.' (Parekh, 2000, p. 47). The community is also generally understood as delimited in space in terms of membership, if not always in association with a particular territory. But it is not necessarily delimited in historical time. Indeed, a sense of both the community's historicity and the distinctiveness of its cultural traditions may be crucial to the assertion of its identity in the present, as we have seen earlier.

Some of the most important debates on the 'politics of recognition' have adopted a robust version of multiculturalism with proponents formulating their arguments in explicit opposition to liberal theories of governance and constitutionalism. From a communitarian/multiculturalist perspective, liberal institutions subordinate cultural differences among citizens to an overarching legalistic uniformity which effectively denies appropriate recognition to minorities. Thus it is argued that governance under liberal constitutionalism cannot do justice to cultural diversity within the state because it assumes sameness among people rather than acknowledging their irreducible and legitimate differences (see Tully, 1995).¹⁴ The communitarian approach is also associated with a more general 'politics of difference' which has seen demands for equal recognition made with respect not just to cultural identity but gender and sexual identity too, as well as marginalized groups of all kinds.¹⁵ In cultural studies, a 'politics of difference' has sought to 'trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific, and particular; and to historicize, contextualize, and pluralize by highlighting 'the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting, and changing.' (West, 1993, p. 257). Modernist empiricism clearly has no place here.

But the politics of difference/recognition has come in for criticism on a number of grounds, not least being the extent to which its 'emancipatory promise' has often fallen victim to the kind of identity politics that encourages separatism, chauvinism, authoritarianism and intolerance while also displacing the pressing economic project of

redistribution with a culturalism no less vulgar than the economism which it spurns. According to one critic, restoring the promise of 'recognition' therefore requires its rethinking in ways that obviate its pernicious tendencies and restores a project of equitable redistribution (Fraser, 2000, pp. 107-08).¹⁶ This reintroduces an important critical perspective missing from so many of the debates. Other critical insights from cultural studies have also been valuable in highlighting the role of ideology. As noted earlier, this concept remains important in focusing attention on the way in which meaning serves relations of domination. In a critical response to Bevir and Rhodes's study of governance, Finlayson (2004, p. 154) points out that the genre of cultural studies promoted by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), differs from traditional hermeneutics by foregrounding ideology rather than tradition, thereby placing questions concerning conflict, contestation and power at the centre of analysis. The concept of tradition, on the other hand, 'is always the outcome of some prior series of political and social conflicts and struggles that makes it look as if "we have always done things this way"'.¹⁷

In normative political philosophy, Young's influential promotion of the politics of difference is asserted in explicit contextualist terms. Young says she rejects as illusory any effort to construct a universal normative system insulated from a particular society, insisting that normative reflection invariably begins from a set of 'historically specific circumstances'. Further, her critical analysis of social justice is limited to Western welfare capitalist societies, and the US in particular, because she claims that her principles and categories cannot simply be applied to the context of international relations or to issues of justice in eastern or southern hemispheres - i.e., the 'non-West' (Young, 1990, p. 5). An apparent advantage of approaches like this is that one's work is inoculated against accusations of Eurocentricity and the sins of Enlightenment rationalism more generally. But while it represents a form of reflexivity, it also creates an epistemological comfort zone by erecting a boundary around the putative cultural/historical space known as 'the West'. This approach not only reinforces the dichotomous formulation of West/non-West, but posits an enormously broad 'context' - 'the West' - within which both subjectivities *and* intersubjectivities are effectively contained. Restricting one's intellectual space to 'the West' (or any other partial construction of the world) in the name of sensitivity to context is highly problematic for students of world politics who can scarcely confine themselves to the study of their own country, hemisphere or some putative 'civilizational area'.¹⁷ More generally, the politics of difference and/or recognition has also been criticized for its 'premature normativism' which not only reifies group identities, but fails to adequately interrogate the meaning of cultural identity and all that it entails. Thus group differences can be frozen as they exist - or as they are thought to exist - at one moment in time (Benhabib, 2002, pp. vii-ix).¹⁸ This negates the dynamism of culture by failing to acknowledge the extent to which it is always in the making, never fixed in any 'specific' form.

More generally, opponents of relativism and/or communitarianism and/or the stronger forms of multiculturalism in normative theory have mustered a range of arguments. These are reasonably well known, but to summarize briefly: First, even if there are significant variations in cultural values giving rise to different normative orientations, there is no compelling reason to accept all of them as right and good (Dower, 1998, pp. 42-43). Second, cultural relativist/communitarian claims tend to be

inherently conservative, favouring the rights of established elites while neglecting the 'right' of internal minority dissent. And if what is valuable is determined by what is already established, how can individuals or small groups articulate a moral view out of line with the existing order? (Dower, 1998, p. 43; cf. Salmon, 1997, p. 49). Third, the (cultural) practices of some members of the group may well entail the subordination or ill-treatment of other members in the name of 'the culture' – a problem not lost on feminist theorists (see Phillips, 1993).

We may also ask whether, if value is entirely self-referential, there are any grounds for 'external' criticism at all, or whether 'outsiders' are left entirely without the moral resources for criticizing the practices of cultural groups other than their own, even where such practices involve genocide, 'honour killings', torture, slavery, etc.? Arguably, the view of an entirely self-referential community depends on a reified concept of culture denoting a unique, bounded entity which contains the limits of intersubjectivity, rather than culture as a dynamic process expressed not simply as a set of practices and beliefs within any given community, but in relations and intersubjectivities that extend across a multiplicity of communities as well. The latter point is particularly important for students of world politics and of pluralistic, multicultural societies where relations must obviously cross putative cultural boundaries.

To date, cosmopolitan critiques have concentrated largely on problems of cultural contextualism and have not generally considered the implications of historical contextualism for normative theory. But if we consider the logic of the latter, it seems to create significant problems for normative judgement in cosmopolitan theory, for when posited in a radical form, historical contextualism logically denies the grounds for moral criticism of *any* historic community. As King argues, the sharp distinction between past and present leads not only to an aversion to moralizing about the past, but also to using the past to moralize about the present (King, 1995, p. 232). Proponents of 'non-Western' causes should be especially concerned. If all 'historic communities' are excused from moral judgement concerning their past practices this must include 'the West', or various parts of it, and the sorry record of indigenous dispossession and genocide, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Holocaust, and so on. None lend themselves to moral judgement from the standpoint of the present if we accept the logic of historical contextualism. It is therefore more than a little ironic that many of those promoting the 'cultural politics of difference' and/or the 'politics of recognition' often invoke historical specificity in one breathe but find no difficulty, in the next, in the most censorious judgement of past actions when it comes to the recognition, and rights of, minorities whose ancestors were enslaved, dispossessed, or subjected to genocidal practices. Moreover, the problems of many marginalized communities in the present are directly linked to past actions – a point supported by the more plausible notion of path dependency and the sequential nature of history. A thoroughgoing historical contextualism therefore has the unfortunate normative consequence of letting contemporary politicians off the hook in terms of recognizing past injustices. In my own country the conservative Prime Minister, John Howard, has refused to issue any statement of apology to indigenous Australians which would recognize injustices perpetrated against their forebears by early British settlers, rejecting what he calls the 'black armband view of history' which links past injustices to present problems. In terms of normative consequences, this is surely the opposite of what proponents of 'recognition' intend.

Conclusion

If we ask whether it is possible to do without some theory or idea of context, cultural, historical or otherwise, common sense seems to dictate otherwise. In methodological or normative terms, no viable account of human rights or of democracy – the most prominent foci of contemporary normative theory in political studies – can ignore the particularities of varying situations. It is self-evident that contextual differences not only exist as between different times and places, but that they also give rise to varying perspectives on a range of political, economic and social issues each of which must be considered, at least provisionally, on its merits. Thus reflexivity as an attitude characterizing good practice in historiography, political theory, or anthropology, is highly commendable. So too is sensitivity to context in both historical research and in the study of contemporary politics. But pressed too hard, methodological contextualism may not only disable the historian from the very attempt to interpret history and elicit what any past figure really meant say, but prevent normative criticism of past practices in any society – practices which may include slavery, genocide and the dispossession of colonized people. Cultural contextualism, taken to the point where it constructs a rigid insider/outsider dichotomy, similarly disables the ‘outsider’ from critical engagement with ‘others’ and their practices, rejects the legitimacy of ‘external’ criticism and contributes to other problematic dichotomies of our time, especially the West/non-West divide.

In considering the relationship between ideology and power, it is also evident that concepts such as ‘culture’ and of ‘history’ constitute exceptionally powerful symbolic resources in the arena of identity politics. These may be used to construct particular meanings or representations that operate readily in the service of power – something not lost on political elites in many different societies around the globe, past and present. Thus when cultural and/or historical context is invoked as constitutive of ‘meaning’, a normatively attuned, critical approach will always require that one asks whose interests are served by any given meaning. This should elicit a much more nuanced and indeed specific interpretation of ‘the context’ within which power is actually exercised.¹⁹

The contextualism underpinning so many denunciations of positivism and modernist empiricism in contemporary scholarship, however, remains mired in difficulties, not least of which are the contradictions which seem to make a coherent theory of context to serve critical studies in both history and culture elusive.²⁰ One way of dissolving at least some of the tension between the respective particularisms on which each is based is to avoid staking out a radical form of contextualism, to cease the mantra-like invocation of ‘specificity’ and recognize instead the fuzziness of contexts, acknowledge the possibility of commensurability (rather than eternal incommensurability) between contexts, and accept the value of both explanatory empirical work and interpretive efforts at producing understanding. None of this may produce a fully coherent theory of context, but it will at least preserve what is valuable in methodological and normative contextualism as a standing critique of the shortcomings of positivism and empiricism without undermining its own logic by simplification or overkill. It may also lead to a more productive research agenda which takes as its starting point a much more dynamic conception of history, culture and associated notions of

context, all of which are processes constantly in the making and which never remain fixed in any 'specific' form.²¹

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² Bevir elsewhere substitutes the conventional foundations of modernist epistemology for 'the community', although he rejects conservative communitarianism and calls for an open concept of community in which there are no fixed identities. Even so, he argues that individuals only hold beliefs, and act, *in the context of community* (Bevir, 2000, pp. 67-82).

³ My two major studies of politics in the Southwest Pacific are both based on a broad historical interpretive approach, but are highly critical of notions of culture and tradition used by elites for politically strategic purposes, and which in turn problematizes the notion of culture-as-context. See Lawson, 1991 and Lawson, 1996.

⁴ Google Scholar is a handy tool for assessing the prevalence of contextualist language in contemporary scholarship. At the time of writing, the terms 'cultural context' and 'historical context' yield around 1.5 million each while in combination 'cultural + historical context' yield almost 900,000. 'Cultural + historical *specificity*' yields some 40,000 references. Of course, Google Scholar's measure is not strictly 'scientific' but it nonetheless indicates how widespread the language is as well as the extent to which both cultural *and* historical specificity are invoked together.

⁵ Geographical/spatial specificity is sometimes added to the mix as well, introducing further complications. Precisely for reasons of 'space', however, I must leave aside this category although aspects of spatial contextualism do map on to aspects of historical and cultural contextualism. For an interesting discussion see Howarth 2006.

⁶ I noticed the contradiction when exploring contextualist ideas for a recent book (see Lawson, 2006). The present article provides a more detailed, focused discussion.

⁷ For an earlier analysis of the problem of 'pure' universalisms and contextualisms see Connolly, 1991, p. 40.

⁸ On the linguistic turn see Rorty 1967; Armstrong 2001.

⁹ Gray's (1999) framework for strategic studies is explicitly interpretive and clearly deploys culture *as* context; cf. Johnston 1995. For a critique see Poore, 2003.

¹⁰ An important exception is Kuper 1999.

¹¹ As with many other related themes touched on in this article, there is insufficient space to engage with relevant debates about incommensurability, but for a recent detailed analysis see D'Agostino (2003).

¹² Dahlberg proposes to use evolutionary theory as the basis for contextual analysis which is surely as 'Western' as any theory could possibly be.

¹³ Note that most contributors to Goodin and Tilly, 2006, do not adopt such a hard and fast contextualism. Indeed, Tilly (p. 420) contrasts his approach with those (and here he cites Raymond Grew as an example) who 'stress the obdurate particularity of historical experiences'. In the same volume, Mahoney and Schensul elaborate the idea of 'path dependency', emphasizing the sequential nature of history.

¹⁴ Some liberal theorists have responded by exploring liberalism's potential to accommodate cultural differences without compromising its essential principles: see Rawls, 1999; Kymlicka, 1995.

¹⁵ See Young, 1990; West, 1993; Taylor, 1994; Baumeister, 2000; Blacksell, 2006.

¹⁶ See also Fraser and Honnarth, 2003, on whether recognition or redistribution is morally prior.

¹⁷ See Lawson 2006, esp. pp. 165-186 for an extended critique of the West/non-West dichotomy and its contribution to a complex of other dichotomies supported by incommensurability theses.

¹⁸ This problem is also a logical consequence of proposed remedies for conflict and justice in ‘ plural societies’ such as consociationalism (Lijphart, 1968), and the alternative to liberal constitutionalism and the ‘rule of uniformity’ proposed by Tully (1995). For critiques see Lawson, 1991; Lawson, 2004.

¹⁹ See Lawson (2006, pp. 147-164) where the importance of *contextualizing the political elements of certain contextual arguments themselves* is illuminated through a case study of the political deployment of Confucianism as context.

²⁰ Bevir and Rhodes (private communication) have subsequently argued that cultural (web of belief) contextualism and historical contextualism can be reconciled by simply regarding them as two moments of explanation that explain different things: ‘So, first, we explain a belief by locating it in the context of a web of beliefs (which is not a reified culture), and, second, we explain webs of belief by locating them against the background of a historical tradition.’ I cannot see, however, how this dissolves the contradiction between the historical and cultural forms.

²¹ For some developments along the lines of such an agenda see Kuper 1999; Calhoun, 2002; Benhabib 2002; Halliday 2005 and Lawson, 2006 as well as various contributions to Goodin and Tilly 2006.