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## Context in Context

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# CONTEXT IN CONTEXT

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*Context* is a term that has come into more and more frequent use in the last thirty or forty years in a number of disciplines—among them, anthropology, archaeology, art history, geography, intellectual history, law, linguistics, literary criticism, philosophy, politics, psychology, sociology, and theology. A trawl through the on-line catalogue of the Cambridge University Library in 1999 produced references to 1,453 books published since 1978 with the word *context* in the title (and 377 more with *contexts* in the plural). There have been good reasons for this development. The attempt to place ideas, utterances, texts, and other artifacts “in context” has led to many insights. All the same there is a price to be paid, the neglect of other approaches and also the inflation or dilution of the central concept, which is sometimes used—ironically enough, out of context—as an intellectual slogan or shibboleth.

To analyze both the present situation and past ones, it is surely necessary to re-place context in its context—or better, in its many contexts, linguistic, literary, ideological, social, psychological, political, cultural, and material. It is also important to ask to whom—or against whom—a given proposition about context was directed (scriptural fundamentalists, for example, believers in eternal wisdom, formalist art historians, enthusiasts for generalization in social science,

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and so on). Changes in the uses of the concept demand to be discussed, and in a manner as reflexive as possible, placing each argument in its own contexts.

## II

It may be useful to begin by sketching the history of the term. A more detailed history, in the style of Reinhart Koselleck's *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*—which has no entry for *context*—is much to be desired, and would replace the word in its linguistic and cultural field. Like *text*, *context* is a metaphor from weaving. *Contextere* is classical Latin for “to weave,” while the noun *contextus* was used in the sense of “connection.” As far as I know, there was no classical Latin term for what we know as context: this does not mean (pace Lucien Febvre) that the idea was lacking, for treatises on conduct and rhetoric emphasized the need to adjust what is said or done and how it is said or done to the time, place, public, and so forth, in order to persuade effectively. The classical division of speeches into three genres, epideictic, deliberative, and forensic, was according to social contexts—those of the funeral, the council, and the courtroom. Speech and behavior were supposed to be governed by the principle of appropriateness, which Aristotle called *to prepon* and Cicero, *decorum*. One locus classicus expressing this principle is Cicero's treatise *De officiis* with its stress on the power of place and time: *Tanta vis est et loci et temporis* (bk. I, chap. 40). Another is Quintilian's statement in his *Orator* that speaking should be “apt” in the sense of “accommodated to the topics and the listeners” (*accomodatus rebus atque personis*: bk. I I, chap. I, sec. I).

It was in the fourth century A.D. that another noun, *contextio*, came into use to describe the text surrounding a given passage that one wishes to interpret. Augustine, for example, in the course of a discussion of biblical interpretation, used the term a number of times in phrases such as *contextio sermonis* or *contextio scripturae*.<sup>1</sup> It may well seem paradoxical that Augustine should have been, if not the inventor, at least one of the first to employ the term *context*, given his concern with a “figural” interpretation of Scripture that appears, at least to modern readers, to be a denial of context. However, it might be argued that it was precisely Augustine's interest in *figura* that made him more conscious of the opposite of figural interpretation: a literal or contextual reading.

The terms just discussed virtually dropped out of use in the Middle Ages, apart from *contextio*, which came to mean “literary composition.”<sup>2</sup> This absence

1. Augustine, *De Genesi ad literam*, ed. Paul Agaësse and Armand Solignac (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972), bk. I, chap. 19, sec. 38–39.

2. There are no references to *contextus* in Du Cange or in Roland E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Wordlist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). But the phrase *prout in contextu legendum est* is recorded in Johan Wilhelmus Fuchs, Olga Weijers, and Marijke Gumbert-Hepp, eds., *Lexicon Latinitatis Nederlandicae Medii Aevi*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981).

does not entitle us to conclude that no one at all in this long period was interested in the kind of problems we call contextual. The interest was sometimes expressed by means of other words, notably *circumstantiae* (“the things that stand around”), a term employed in biblical exegesis. In the ninth century, for example, Sedulius Scotus enunciated the rule of “seven circumstances”—person, fact, cause, time, place, mode, and topic. His debt to the categories of classical logic and rhetoric will be obvious enough. In the thirteenth century, once again in an exegetical context, Aquinas regularly referred to what he called “literary circumstance” (*circumstantia litterae*). Augustine too had used the term *circumstantia* in this sense.<sup>3</sup> All the same, references to circumstances were relatively rare in the Middle Ages, and the emphasis on allegorical interpretations of the Bible ran counter to contextual thinking.

While the absence of a particular word does not prove the absence of interest in a topic, the rise of a new term or the revival of an old one usually expresses increasing interest or awareness. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in vernacular languages such as Italian, French, English, or German, the words *contesto*, *contexture*, *context*, and *Kontext* began to be used, usually in discussions of the interpretation of texts, especially the Bible and Aristotle’s. The meaning of the term gradually expanded at this time. The earlier usage survived, and the *Encyclopédie* (1754) still defined *contexte* as “l’ensemble du texte qui entoure un extrait et qui éclaire son sens.” However, the term also came to refer to the coherence of an entire text. Thus Furetière’s dictionary (1690) defined *contexture* as “liaison des parties dans l’ensemble d’une composition littéraire.” One local context for discussions of *contextus* was the practice of translation, encouraging awareness of the need to attend not only to individual words but to the relations between them. The term was also invoked in discussions of authenticity. The ecclesiastical historian William Cave, for instance, enunciating seven rules for distinguishing genuine works by the Fathers from false ones, formulated the fourth rule as “the style and the whole texture of the work” (*stylus totiusque orationis contextus*).<sup>4</sup>

A third and more extended sense of the term included the intention of the writer, often described as his *scopus* or in English as “scope.” Thus Galileo, in his *Letter to the Grand Duchess* (1615) about the use of the Bible in disputes over natural philosophy, quoted Augustine on *contextio sermonis* to support his argument that the Bible was often interpreted “in senses so far from the real intention of the scripture” (*in sensu tanto remoti dall’intenzione retta di essa Scrittura*) that it was better not to quote it at all in these debates.<sup>5</sup> A generation later, another natural

3. Ceslaus Spicq, *Esquisse d’une histoire de l’exégèse latine au moyen âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1944), 45, 250–51.

4. Glyn P. Norton, *The Ideology and Language of Translation in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), 166–67;

William Cave, *Scriptorum ecclesiasticarum historia literaria*, 2 vols. (London: 1688–98), 1:xi.

5. Galileo Galilei, *Opere*, ed. Ferdinando Flora (Milan-Naples: R. Ricciardi, 1953), 1036–82.

philosopher, Robert Boyle, referred to divines who misinterpret scripture through neglect of “the context and the speaker’s scope.”<sup>6</sup> In similar fashion, the church historian Gottfried Arnold, discussing the ideas of the heretic Kaspar Schwenckfeld, advised the reader to set his words in “the full context” (*dem gantzen Context*).<sup>7</sup> The concern with intention or purpose (“scope”) deserves to be noted, including the metaphorical or semimetaphorical attribution of intention to a text, the Bible, or the laws (the *mens, sententia, or voluntas legum*).<sup>8</sup>

However, in the early modern period, much of the discussion of what we would term context, whether in law, ethics, political thought, or theology, was phrased in terms of “circumstances” (as in the Middle Ages) or “occasions”—or in terms of what Machiavelli called the “quality of the times” (*la qualità de’tempi*)—to which political leaders needed to adapt themselves if they wished to succeed. Jurists discussed circumstantial evidence and also the place of circumstances in interpreting and applying laws.<sup>9</sup> In the case of ethics, this was the age of the rise of casuistry in both the Catholic and the Protestant worlds. *Casuistry* is a pejorative eighteenth-century term for the study of “cases of conscience,” the ethical equivalent of case law, replacing the application of general rules by the investigation of particular circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Discussions of the interpretation of the Bible regularly invoked the need to take circumstances into consideration. The Lutheran divine Matthias Flacius, for example, whose *Clavis Scripturae* (1567) was discussed by Dilthey a century ago as a milestone in the development of hermeneutics, discussed six *circumstantiae* (one fewer than Sedulius seven centuries earlier): the person, the time, the style, the intention, the place, and the instrument. Under the heading “person,” for instance, he considered who was speaking to whom, about what, and in the presence of whom.<sup>11</sup> In similar fashion, writers on the art of preaching stressed the need to “accommodate” sermons both to the occasion on which they were delivered (such as Lent or Easter), and to the audience, whether clerical or lay, learned or ignorant.

An outstanding example of contextual thinking in early modern style is the work of the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini. In a passage of his aphorisms on politics, Guicciardini notes “how mistaken are those who quote the

6. Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations Touching the Style of the Scriptures* (London: 1661), 71.

7. Gottfried Arnold, *Unparteyische Kirche-und Ketzer-Historie*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt: 1699–1700), 4:451.

8. Donald Kelley, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 87–115, at 98; Ian Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning in the Renaissance: The Case of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 147–52.

9. Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning*, 81, 123, 128, 179.

10. Edmund Leites, ed., *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Albert R. Jonsen, “Casuistical,” *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (1993): 48–65; James F. Keenan and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *The Context of Casuistry* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000).

11. Matthias Flacius, *Clavis Scripturae*, 2 vols. (Basel: 1567), 2:18–24.

Romans at every step,” since “one would have to have a city with exactly the same conditions as theirs” for their example to be relevant. Again, Guicciardini’s “Considerations” on the *Discourses* of his friend Machiavelli criticized the generalizations because they were “advanced too absolutely” [*posto troppo assolutamente*]. Guicciardini wished to make more distinctions, “because the cases are different” [*perché i casi sono vari*], and human affairs “differ according to the times and the other events” [*si varia secondo la condizione de’ tempi ed altre occorrenzie*].<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Guicciardini criticized Machiavelli for not paying sufficient attention to what the Protestant soldier François de La Noue—commenting on Guicciardini’s own *History of Italy* and following the classical rhetoricians—called “les circonstances des temps, lieux et personnes.” As La Noue remarked elsewhere, adapting a commonplace, a particular course of action does not suit all countries any more than a slipper fits all feet [*comme un soulier ne convient pas à tous pieds, aussi un fait ne se peut approprier à tous pais*].<sup>13</sup> A similar point was reiterated in Montaigne’s essays, one of the most powerful sixteenth-century criticisms of the traditional idea of exemplarity—of the relevance of ancient examples as a guide to conduct.<sup>14</sup> Such problems also underlie a seventeenth-century debate about the study of politics, whether it should be regarded as a science formulating rules or as the art of distinguishing exceptions.

One cultural context for these linguistic changes is provided by the Renaissance and Reformation. The movement to revive antiquity led to awareness of differences between the culture of the idealized classical past and that of later periods, for example between classical Latin and later Latin, a point already prominent in Lorenzo Valla’s argument that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery.<sup>15</sup> As the movement increased in importance, tensions within it became more obvious. Erasmus’s *Ciceronianus* is the classic discussion of the problem of imitation, in which the question arises whether Cicero, if he had been alive when the dialogue was written, in 1528, would have spoken and written as he did in Rome in his own day. Although Erasmus does not use the word *context*, his dialogue discusses fundamental problems of what we have come to call *contextualization*.

As for the Reformation, including the Counter-Reformation, the attempt to apply biblical precepts to everyday life in a literal-minded fashion, especially by Protestant “fundamentalists” (as we might call them), raised the problem whether or not these precepts were intended to be generally applicable. In

12. Francesco Guicciardini, “Considerazioni intorno ai Discorsi del Machiavelli,” in *Scritti politici e ricordi*, ed. Robert Palmarocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1933), 8, 19, 41.

13. François de La Noue, *Discours politiques et militaires* (1587); ed. Frank E. Sutcliffe (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 121 n. 111.

14. Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

15. Joseph Levine, “Reginald Pecock and Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine,” reprinted in *Humanism and History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 54–72.

England, for example, Richard Hooker argued that the laws of the Church needed to be modified to respond to “alteration of time and place,” while King James I, in controversy with the group it remains convenient to describe as the Puritans, declared that the law of Moses was not universal. It was simply the law of ancient Israel, “only fit for that country, that people and that time.”<sup>16</sup> Again, in their remarks on context already quoted, Galileo and Boyle were reacting to Catholic and Protestant attempts to claim that the conclusions of natural philosophers were wrong because they contradicted the Bible.

On the other hand, the thrust of the movements we call—with some hesitations—the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment was anticontextual in the sense that participants, fascinated by the geometrical method, were concerned with formulating laws of nature and society, generalizations that would be valid whatever the circumstances of time, place, or persons. As the philosopher Stephen Toulmin has argued, this “attempt to decontextualise philosophy and natural science” needs to be replaced in “its own social and historical context” as a quest for certainty that becomes more pressing in an age of ideological conflict, notably during the Thirty Years’ War.<sup>17</sup>

All the same, it would be unwise to describe the eighteenth century as without a sense of context. Some thinkers expressed distrust in universal rules of behavior or of law. The advice on conduct given in the *Spectator*, for instance, was qualified, as in the case of the casuists, by concern with particular circumstances.<sup>18</sup> In his *New Science* (bk. 2, secs. 782, 902), Giambattista Vico tried to explain the barbarous behavior of Achilles and Agamemnon as Homer had described it by placing it in the context of Greek customs in that heroic age.

Collingwood’s criticism of Hume for his assumption of the uniformity of human nature is well known, but as Mark Phillips has argued, Hume was well aware of variations in circumstances. For example, Hume reached a more favorable judgment on the Stuarts than did his Whig contemporaries, because he placed their actions in the context of a constitution that, before 1688, was “very ambiguous and undetermin’d.”<sup>19</sup> By the late eighteenth century, “Enlightened” attitudes were coming to be viewed as part of an intellectual old regime against which a younger and, as we now say, more historicist generation revolted around

16. Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (c. 1592; reprint, London: J. M. Dent, 1907), bk. 3, chap. 10, sec. 3; David Harris Willson, *King James VI and I* (London: J. Cape, 1956), 200.

17. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 31–35, 44.

18. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *Spectator* (1712), nos. 274, 428; cf. Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke, *The Spectator e o Teatro das Luzes* (São Paulo: Hucitec, 1994), 186.

19. R. G. Collingwood, “The Idea of History” (1928), in *The Idea of History* (1946; revised ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 83; Mark Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 46.

the year 1800, stressing differences between individuals and cultures at the expense of general laws.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Rise of Cultural Context*

This “Counter-Enlightenment” was associated with a major expansion in the meaning of the term *context*, a meaning that continued the emphasis on factors external to the text but increasingly concerned not only the immediate setting of writers and readers but also a more general historical context—and the metaphor of “historical context” was no longer perceived as a metaphor. To some degree, this expansion of meaning might be described as a kind of conceptual imperialism, with *context* taking over the territory that *circumstances* had previously occupied. However, a shift is also discernible from what might be called the micro-context of local circumstances to the macrocontext of an entire culture, society, or age. Even when the word *context* is not employed, there are signs of an increasing interest in locating texts, artifacts, and actions in this way. A famous example is Madame de Staël’s essay *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1800). Her friend James Mackintosh, who had similar interests, stressed the relation between literature and what he called “the state of the general feeling.”<sup>21</sup>

Within the German tradition of hermeneutics, the customary concern with the immediate context of the passage to be interpreted now widened. In a study published in 1808, for example, the classical scholar Friedrich Ast made distinctions among the literal or grammatical level of interpretation, the historical level (concerned with meaning), and the cultural level (concerned with grasping the spirit [*Geist*] of antiquity or other periods). Over a century later, Erwin Panofsky would make a similar distinction among three levels in his discussion of the iconographical method.<sup>22</sup>

Karl Marx was a contextualist in another sense, concerned to locate consciousness and its expressions within “life,” especially social life. Marxists and non-Marxists alike were increasingly concerned with *Zusammenhang*, a term that came into use in the late eighteenth century to refer to the way in which different beliefs, customs, and so on “hang together.” The term was central to the intellectual system of Wilhelm Dilthey, the philosopher and historian who played a key role in widening the art of interpretation from texts to the lives of individuals and groups, from intentions on particular occasions to personality developing over time. In his biography of Schleiermacher, for instance, interpreting the

20. Karl Mannheim, *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1927; English trans., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

22. Friedrich Ast, *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* (Landshut: 1808); Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (1939; 2d ed., New York: Harper, 1962), 3–31.

21. Quoted in Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, 210.

life of a great interpreter of texts, Dilthey declared his aim as that of describing the intellectual development of his protagonist and the *Zusammenhang* or links between this development and the cultural movements of the time. Hence Dilthey carefully reconstructed the successive cultural milieux through which Schleiermacher had passed: his family, his education, his circle in Berlin, and the like.<sup>23</sup>

An English equivalent for *Zusammenhang* was *context*. In the seventeenth century, discussing the impossibility of laying down simple rules of law, Matthew Hale had given an old metaphor a new twist when he wrote of “the texture of human affairs.”<sup>24</sup> His comparison was not taken up at the time, but the phrase “moral context,” first recorded in 1842, had more success. The success of the “life and times” model of biography in the nineteenth century is another indicator of the sensitivity to wider contexts that had been developing since the 1750s.

Material as well as moral context was taken more seriously in the nineteenth century than before. In archaeology, the increasing concern with stratigraphy in the early nineteenth century implied a displacement of interest from ancient objects in themselves, as studied by traditional antiquarians, to their context or location.<sup>25</sup> The place of debates concerning public museums in the rise of a sharper sense of material context also deserves emphasis. In 1796, for instance, in a letter to General Miranda, and again in 1815, Quatremère de Quincy, a Frenchman, denounced the looting of Italian works of art by Napoleon, Lord Elgin, and others on the grounds that this uprooting or *déplacement* deprived the objects of their cultural value. Quatremère’s point was that the associations, meaning, and power of an artifact depended on its uses and its location. To displace it was to destroy. The appropriate setting for Italian artifacts was Italy itself, which he described as a museum without walls, “le Muséum intégral.”<sup>26</sup>

Within museums, the principles of classification began to be debated. In the 1780s, the art collection at Vienna was reorganized by schools of art arranged in chronological order. The Louvre followed suit in its Grand Gallery after the Revolution, and Alexandre Le Noir also adopted a chronological system in the new Museum of French Monuments in the 1790s. The point was to clarify the meaning of individual artifacts by placing them in a sequence.<sup>27</sup> Again, Christian

23. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Leben Schleiermacher* (1870; ed. Martin Redeker, [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1970].

24. Quoted in J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 171.

25. Glyn Daniel, *A Hundred and Fifty Years of Archaeology* (London: Duckworth, 1975); Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

26. Quatremère de Quincy, *Lettres*, 44, 48, 192, 239; cf. René Schneider, *Quatremère de Quincy et son intervention dans les arts* (Paris: Hachette, 1910), 166, 182, 184 n; Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology and Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

27. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79–80, 107, 164–65.

Thomsen, who was asked in 1816 to reorganize the collection of early artifacts in the Danish National Museum, solved the problem by classifying them in their temporal context according to three consecutive ages, defined as the ages of stone, bronze, and iron.

Later in the century, the German anthropologist Franz Boas caused a sensation in museum circles in the United States by arguing that exhibits should not be arranged according to the type of artifact or the stage that the objects represented in an evolutionary sequence. They should be arranged by “culture area.” The point of the change in arrangement was that, according to Boas, an object could not be understood “outside of its surroundings,” physical and cultural. Hence Boas liked to show what he called “life groups” in the museum, with models of people using the objects, in order, as he put it, “to transport the visitor into foreign surroundings.”<sup>28</sup> The surroundings helped viewers to interpret the objects, just as the context helped readers to interpret texts.

In a number of disciplines, in the 1920s and 1930s the term *situation* came to play a central role. These disciplines included sociology, psychology, history, and above all the relatively new academic subject of anthropology, which Franz Boas, moving from the museum to the university, helped to establish in the United States.

For instance, Karl Mannheim, one of the pioneers of the sociology of knowledge, treated ideas as socially situated (literally “tied to the situation,” *Situationsgebunden*). In other words, ideas were dependent on the social “location” (*Lagerung*) or “position” of individuals in groups such as classes or generations.<sup>29</sup> At much the same time in the United States, the sociologist William I. Thomas, concerned with small groups and social action, was developing his idea of the “definition of the situation,” and developing his contrast of “commonly and publicly accepted definitions of situations” with “rival definitions.”<sup>30</sup>

Some students of literature and art were making a sociological turn at this time. Critics sympathetic to Marxism, notably Georg Lukács, emphasized the response of writers to social situations.<sup>31</sup> In England, the influential critic Frank Leavis, although never a Marxist, was concerned, in the words of an early

28. Franz Boas, “Museums of Ethnology and their Classification,” *Science* 9 (1887), 587–89. Cf. Ira Jacknis, “Franz Boas and Exhibits,” in *Objects and Others*, ed. George Ward Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); see also “The Ethnographic Object and the Object of Ethnology in the Early Career of Franz Boas,” in *Volksgeist as Method and Ethic*, ed. George Ward Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 185–214, at 205; and Erich Kasten, “Franz Boas’ Ethnographie und Museumsmethode,” in *Franz Boas*, ed. Michael Dürr, Erich Kasten, and Egon Renner (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 1992), 79–102.

29. Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of a Sociology of Knowledge” (1925) and “The Problem of Generations” (1927; English translation in *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952], 134–90, 276–320).

30. William I. Thomas, “Situational Analysis” (1927; reprinted in *W. I. Thomas on Social Organisation and Social Personality*, ed. Morris Janowitz [Chicago: University of Chicago Press], 1966), 154–67, at 167.

31. Denys W. Harding, reviewing *New Bearings in English Poetry*, *Scrutiny* 1 (1932): 89.

reviewer, to show the relation of poetry “to the state of culture in which it was produced.” A movement for a “social history of art” also developed in the 1930s. Among its leading practitioners were Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser, who were, like Mannheim, members of the Lukács circle in Budapest. After Antal took refuge in England, he introduced this approach to Herbert Read, Anthony Blunt, and John Berger.<sup>32</sup>

In psychology, a concern with frame, context, situation, or environment marked a number of enterprises located on the frontier with sociology. Students of memory, notably Maurice Halbwachs, stressed its “social frame” (*cadres sociaux*), and also the “contextual stimuli” and “contextual cues” that brought memories to the surface. In Russia, Lev Vygotsky and Aleksandr Luria argued that the mentality of illiterates was characterized by “concrete or situational thinking.” Luria derived his idea of situational thinking from Kurt Goldstein’s work on lesions of the brain, which distinguished concrete thought, “bound to the immediate experience of unique objects and situations,” from abstract thought, associated with the ability to shift “from one aspect of a situation to another” and so free itself from dependence on context.<sup>33</sup>

A general “field theory” of psychology was put forward by Kurt Lewin, using the term *field* as a synonym for the “lifespace” or environment of an individual or group. Without studying the field, he argued, the behavior of individuals and groups could not be understood. In other words, Lewin practiced what he sometimes called “psychological ecology.” His approach might also be described as a “situational psychology,” similar in some respects to the situational anthropology and linguistics of the time.<sup>34</sup>

In the case of history, we might contrast the French with the English approach. Marc Bloch’s famous study *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924), which does not use the term *context*, attempts nevertheless to make ideas that now seem alien, like the belief in the supernatural power of the royal touch, intelligible by refusing to treat them in isolated fashion and by showing how attitudes to the powers of kings formed a whole. Drawing on the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and other anthropologists, Bloch explored collective attitudes as part of a belief system.<sup>35</sup> In Britain, a few years later, Herbert Butterfield and R. G. Collingwood concerned themselves with contexts and situations at the individual rather than

32. Peter Burke, “The Central European Moment in British Cultural Studies” (forthcoming).

33. Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1962); Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, *Cognitive Development* (English trans., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 49; Kurt Goldstein, *Language and Language Disturbances* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1948), 6. Cf. Christopher Robert Hallpike, *The Foundations of Primitive Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979),

117–21, and Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin, eds., *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19–22.

34. Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science* (London: Tavistock, 1952), xi, 170–87, 238–304.

35. Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924; rev. ed., Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 18.

the collective level. Butterfield defined the historian's task as that of understanding an individual action, which is "to recover the thousand threads that connect it with other things, to establish it in a system of relations; in other words, to place it in its historical context." For his part, placing more stress on intentions, Collingwood declared that "every event . . . is a conscious reaction to a situation, not the effect of a cause."<sup>36</sup>

Collingwood's *The Idea of History* developed this idea further. "Thinking," he argued, "is never done *in vacuo*: it is always done by a determinate person in a determinate situation." Collingwood was not thinking of a social situation in Mannheim's sense so much as of a definition of the situation in the style of W. I. Thomas. "The situation," Collingwood insisted, "consists altogether of thoughts." In the case of a political conflict, for instance, "what the historian has to do is to see how the two parties conceived the political situation as it stood." A historian who wants to understand an edict of the emperor Theodosius must not only "envisage the situation with which the emperor was trying to deal" but also "envisage it as that emperor envisaged it."<sup>37</sup>

Anthropology is sometimes perceived, not without reason, as the contextual discipline par excellence. More exactly, it became this kind of discipline, after a period in which the ideas of evolution and diffusion were dominant. From the Boas critique of museum displays organized according to stages of human development, it was only a step to the wholesale rejection of evolutionary anthropology, symbolized by Sir James Frazer, as insufficiently sensitive to context. The American Robert Lowie, for example, wrote of what he called the "non-identity" of the identical in different "psychological contexts."<sup>38</sup>

The most famous critic of Frazer was Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski was concerned with what he called the "contextual specification of meaning" and the problem of translating the untranslatable. Meaning, he argued, is dependent on the "context of situation" so that "the concept of context has to be broadened" to accommodate this point.<sup>39</sup> Malinowski discussed material culture in terms sim-

36. Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell, 1931), 20; Collingwood, "Outlines of a Philosophy of History," in *Idea of History*, 426–96, at 475.

37. *Ibid.*, 115–16, 283, 316.

38. Robert H. Lowie, "On the Principle of Convergence in Ethnology," *Journal of American Folklore* 25 (1912): 24–42, at 41; cf. Edmund Leach, "Frazer and Malinowski" (1966; reprinted in *The Essential Leach*, ed. Stephen Hugh-Jones and James Laidlaw, 2 vols. [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000], 1:25–43).

39. Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," in *The Meaning of Meaning*, ed. Charles Kay Ogden and I. A. Richards (London: Rout-

ledge and Kegan Paul, 1923), 451–510, at 465; see also Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1935), 2:23–45. Cf. John Rupert Firth, "Ethnographic Analysis and Language with Reference to Malinowski's Views," in *Man and Culture*, ed. Raymond Firth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 93–118; Robert Henry Robins, "Malinowski, Firth and the 'Context of Situation,'" in *Social Anthropology and Language*, ed. Edwin Ardener (London: Tavistock, 1971), 33–46; Fred C. C. Peng, "On the Context of Situation," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 58 (1986): 91–105; Ernest Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 121, 148, 152.

ilar to those used for discussing language: he took the example of a stick that might be used for digging, punting, walking, or fighting. “In each of these specific uses,” he claimed, “the stick is embedded in a different cultural context; that is, put to different uses, surrounded with different ideas, given a different cultural value and as a rule designated by a different name.”<sup>40</sup>

Malinowski’s situational approach was taken further by the so-called Manchester School of anthropology. Max Gluckman, for instance, offered a “situational analysis” of a series of events surrounding the opening of a bridge in Zululand in order to bring social conflicts to light. Drawing on the work of W. I. Thomas as well as that of Max Gluckman, Clyde Mitchell studied social networks from what he called “the situational perspective,” while Bruce Kapferer offered, along similar lines, a brilliant interpretation of a conflict “in a work context” among mine employees in Zambia.<sup>41</sup> This focus on face-to-face situations was an attempt to avoid assuming the homogeneity of a whole culture, as so many anthropologists tended to do at the time.<sup>42</sup>

The anthropologist who took Malinowski’s ideas about context furthest was his former pupil Edward Evans-Pritchard, in his study of witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande. The term *context* does not often appear in this study.<sup>43</sup> What the study does, however, is explore two important ideas that had had or were to have considerable influence in other disciplines: the dependence of thought on situation and the dependence of one belief on others. In the first place, Evans-Pritchard described the ideas of the Azande as “imprisoned in action,” going on to explain that “each situation demands the particular pattern of thought appropriate to it. Hence an individual in one situation will employ a notion he excludes in a different situation.”<sup>44</sup> In the second place, skepticism about witchcraft, oracles, and magic is difficult for the Azande because “all their beliefs hang together” (compare *Zusammenhang*). The three phenomena “form an intellectually coherent system. Each explains and proves the other.” Witch doctors and laymen are “enclosed in the same network of thought.” In the most famous of his various formulations of this idea, Evans-Pritchard declared that, in “this web of belief every strand depends upon every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows.”<sup>45</sup>

40. Bronislaw Malinowski, “Culture,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (1930; 2d ed., New York: Macmillan, 1948), 3:621–45.

41. Max Gluckman, *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958); James Clyde Mitchell, “The Situational Perspective,” in *Cities, Society and Social Perception: A Central African Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 1–33; Bruce Kapferer, “Norms and the Manipulation of Social Relationships in a Work Context,” in *Social Networks in Urban Situations*, ed. James Clyde Mitchell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969), 181–244.

42. Jan van Velsen, “The Extended-Case Method and Situational Analysis,” in *The Craft of Social Anthropology*, ed. Arnold L. Epstein (London: Tavistock, 1967), 129–49, at 136.

43. Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1937), 134.

44. *Ibid.*, 83, 349.

45. *Ibid.*, 194–95, 255, 475.

The parallel with some of the observations of Vygotsky and Luria is clear enough, even though Evans-Pritchard did not relate the situational thought of the Azande to their illiteracy. The parallel with Bloch's study of the royal touch is even stronger, since Bloch explained the persistence of trust in the touch in terms of its place in a belief system. The study of medieval history that Evans-Pritchard had once pursued was not useless to the mature anthropologist.

### III

In the last generation or so, we have been living through what might be called a "contextual turn," on the analogy of so many other turns. One sign of change is a series of terms that, if not always newly coined, are in more common use than before. In English, for example, *contextualism* (first recorded in 1929, in a philosophical context) and *contextualize* (1934, in linguistics) have been joined by *contextualization* (1951, in anthropology) and *decontextualize* (1971, in sociology). In French, *contextuel* is recorded from 1963 onward.

Once again, it would be a mistake to place great emphasis on particular words, since other terms—*circumstances*, *situations*, and so on—were already in use to discuss these issues. The variety of technical terms is a reminder that similar problems have recurred and have been solved in different ways by various scholars in various disciplines. Yet interdisciplinary discussions of the problems raised by the notion of context are all too rare.<sup>46</sup> Such an analysis might note both borrowings and independent reinventions; it might distinguish analogies between the problems raised in different disciplines from the disanalogies—between the study of texts and, say, ax-heads, between the direct observation of situations and their reconstruction on the basis of documents. The problem is of course that a comparative analysis of this kind would require an acquaintance with a broad range of disciplines.

In the case of theology, for example, comparison would require discussion of the so-called contextual reinterpretation of religion; in ethics, it would be concerned with the rise of a "situationism" that has effectively revived casuistry under another name.<sup>47</sup> In the case of philosophy, the continuing influence of Wittgenstein's emphasis on meaning as use would demand discussion, as would John Austin's analysis of the "occasion" and "context" of utterances.<sup>48</sup> In political science, attention would have to be given to contextual explanations of phenomena

46. Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*.

47. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (London: Orbis, 1992); Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (1966; 2d ed., London: John Knox, 1997).

48. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), esp. 11–13; John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (1955; 2d ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

ranging from international relations to election results.<sup>49</sup> In the case of archaeology, the rise of a new contextual approach in Cambridge would merit discussion. Although, as was suggested above, the stratigraphic method implies a tradition of sensitivity to material contexts, “contextual archaeology” is distinctive in its focus on “reading” the meanings and associations of objects and their “contexts of use.”<sup>50</sup>

In geography, given its essential concern with “environment,” a contextual approach might seem to be otiose, but terms such as *situation* and *context* are increasingly employed following the Swedish “time-geographer” Torsten Hägerstrand’s recommendation to focus on what he calls “the principles of togetherness,” especially at a local level.<sup>51</sup> Even in the case of law, which might be said to be a deliberately anticontextual or, better, a decontextualizing enterprise, a series of studies entitled “Law in Context” was planned in 1965 and began to appear in Britain in 1970, while Ronald Dworkin has noted the rise of “context sensitivity” in legal language.<sup>52</sup>

The discussion that follows, despite all these possibilities for comparison, will be limited to education, sociolinguistics, literature, and social and cultural history. In educational sociology and psychology, the work of Bernstein, Bruner, and Cole on learning illustrates the contextual trend.<sup>53</sup> In Britain, the sociologist Basil Bernstein’s famous contrast between two forms of language, the “restricted” and “elaborated” codes, originally lacked any reference to the word *context*, but by 1969 Bernstein was describing the codes as respectively “context-dependent” and “context-independent.”<sup>54</sup> In the United States, the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner picked up Bernstein’s phrases when discussing the role of the school in establishing “context-independent modes of thinking” via literacy. Bruner’s earlier discussions of cognitive growth in children had described perception as “field dependent,” “non-transformable,” or “stuck.”<sup>55</sup> Bernstein and

49. Gregory Goertz, *Contexts of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); John Agnew, “Mapping Politics: How Context Counts in Electoral Geography,” *Political Geography* 15 (1996): 129–46.

50. Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology* (1986; rev. ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Michael Shanks and Ian Hodder, “Processual, Post-Processual and Interpretive Archaeology,” in Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, and Alexandra Alexandri, eds., *Interpreting Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3–29, at 14–17.

51. Torsten Hägerstrand, “Geography and the Study of Interaction between Nature and Society,” *Geoforum* 3 (1976): 329–34; cf. Nigel Thrift, “On the Determination of Social Action in Time and Space,” *Society and Space* 1 (1983): 23–57.

52. William Twining, *Law in Context* (1967; Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 43–44; Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 104–5, 108; cf. Peter Goodrich, *Legal Discourse* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 167.

53. Basil Bernstein, “Social Class, Language and Socialization” (1970; reprinted in *Language and Social Context*, ed. Pier Paolo Giglioli [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972], 157–77); Jerome S. Bruner, “Culture and Cognitive Growth,” in *Beyond the Information Given* (London: George Allen, 1974), 368–93.

54. Basil Bernstein, “A Critique of the Concept of Compensatory Education” (1969; reprinted in *Class, Codes and Control* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971], 190–201).

Bruner were of course aware of the earlier work by Vygotsky and Luria. The developmental psychologist Michael Cole and his team, working in Liberia, carried on this tradition in their attempt to explain why Kpelle children “experience a good deal of difficulty with Western-style mathematics,” arguing that learning and thinking are shaped by a “cultural context,” and that cognitive skills “are closely related to the activities that engage those skills.”<sup>56</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, sociolinguistics (otherwise known as the “sociology of language” or the “ethnography of speaking”) became a semiautonomous discipline, with leaders in the field such as Dell Hymes, Joshua Fishman, William Labov, and John Gumperz all emphasizing the human capacity for switching codes or “registers” according to the context or situation.<sup>57</sup> For example, a classic study by Labov, arguing against the idea that black children in the United States were inarticulate, described an experiment to show that “the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behaviour.”<sup>58</sup> The parallel with Evans-Pritchard’s description of individual Azande as switching concepts will be obvious enough: “An individual in one situation will employ a notion he excludes in a different situation.”<sup>59</sup> Folklorists have been studying the performance of oral narratives in a way similar to that of linguists. Attention has been drawn to the “spatial context” of performance, who is standing where, how close to or distant from whom.<sup>60</sup>

In sociology, Anthony Giddens has placed considerable stress on “locale” as essential to what he calls the “contextuality” of social interaction, while feminists such as Donna Haraway have revived Mannheim’s concept of “situated knowledge,” although they define the situation in terms of gender rather than class.<sup>61</sup> Situation was also central to the work of Erving Goffman, whose dramaturgical approach to everyday life stressed the variety of social roles available to individuals and the difference in the “performance” of the same people in different settings—such as the waiter in the restaurant whom customers see as

55. Jerome S. Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given*, 325–59; see also Bruner, *Studies in Cognitive Growth* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 21–22.

56. Michael Cole et al., *The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), xi, 20.

57. Dell Hymes, “The Ethnography of Speaking,” in *Anthropology and Human Behavior*, ed. Thomas Gladwin and William C. Sturtevant (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institute, 1962), 15–53; Joshua Fishman, “The Sociology of Language” (1969; reprinted in Giglioli, *Language and Social Context*, 45–58, at 48–50).

58. William Labov, “The Logic of Non-Standard English” (1969; reprinted in Giglioli, *Language and Social Context*, 179–218, at 191).

59. Evans-Pritchard, *Azande*, 349.

60. Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert St. George, “Massacred Language: Courtroom Performance in Eighteenth-Century Boston,” in *Possible Pasts: Becoming Colonial in Early America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 327–56, at 339.

61. Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 118; Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledge,” *Feminist Studies* 14 (1986): 575–99.

impassive but who changes demeanor completely when he enters the “back region” of the kitchen.<sup>62</sup> Goffman’s achievement might be described as an elaboration of the idea of the “definition of the situation” put forward by an earlier Chicago sociologist, W. I. Thomas.

“Performance” is a concept that has become increasingly central to a number of disciplines, beginning with sociolinguistics.<sup>63</sup> The concept’s importance lies in its potential for undermining older kinds of historical (or indeed sociological) explanation. Much human behavior used to be given explanations such as “*A* said or did *X* because he or she was a *B*” (a bourgeois, say, or a Puritan). By contrast, a performance-centered approach encourages the substitution of explanations of the form “*A* said or did *X* because he or she was in a situation that required confrontation, compromise, etc.” If not exactly a shift from social determinism to individual freedom, this is at least a turn from the idea of fixed reactions, following rules, to the notion of flexible responses—to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (borrowing from Panofsky, who borrowed from Aquinas, who in turn borrowed from Aristotle) calls a “*habitus*.”<sup>64</sup>

In social history, a concern with situation and performance has become increasingly visible. Edward Thompson, for example, discussing what he termed the “plebeian” culture of the eighteenth century, noted a combination of two opposed attitudes to “patricians”—deference and aggression—arguing that “we should take neither the obeisances nor the imprecations as indications of final truth: both could flow from the same mind, as circumstances and calculation of interest allowed.” Historians of slavery such as Eugene Genovese have made a similar point about deference as performance, as what the slaves called “putting on.” Again, the social historian Peter Bailey has interpreted the deference of the Victorian working class as a performance limited to certain “regions” and laid aside when members of the middle or upper classes were no longer within sight or earshot. The increasing frequency of references to Goffman and Bourdieu in the work of social historians is symptomatic of a general change of mind.<sup>65</sup>

62. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 22, 106–40, esp. 118; see also Goffman, “The Neglected Situation” (1964; reprinted in Giglioli, *Language and Social Context*, 61–66), and *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); on Goffman, see Joshua Meyrowitz, “Redefining the Situation,” in *Beyond Goffman*, ed. Stephen Harold Riggs (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990), 65–97.

63. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 7.

64. It was to Panofsky and not (as some might have expected) to Heidegger, that Bourdieu expressed his debt

when I asked him about his concept of *habitus* some twenty years ago.

65. Edward P. Thompson, “The Crime of Anonymity,” in Douglas Hay et al., *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: A. Lane, 1975), 255–308, at 307; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (London: Deutsch, 1975), 609–12; Peter Bailey, “Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?: Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-Victorian Working-Class Respectability,” *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978): 336–53. Cf. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 23–28.

The concept of performance is more obviously relevant to studies of music, drama, and literature. In ethnomusicology, for instance, a debate has been going on since the 1950s about the degree of emphasis to be given to context. *Performative context* has come into use to refer to the adaptation of music in performance to the place, the occasion, and the audience.<sup>66</sup> Plays such as Molière's *Georges Dandin* have also been re-placed in their original "conditions of representation"—Versailles in 1668, in the case of Molière's play, together with the package of court entertainments, including music and ballet, of which the comedy formed a part.<sup>67</sup>

Harder to classify as well as more influential has been the movement in literary history, especially the history of English literature, labeled the "New Historicism," and associated with the journal *Representations* and with scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. Some New Historicists have been criticized as indifferent to context by supporters of what has been called "Archaeo-Historicism."<sup>68</sup> Like the older historicists, however, the new ones are opposed to the formalist approach. Some of their work is certainly contextualist in the sense of the term discussed in the previous paragraph. Montrose, for example, has re-placed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the performative context of the Elizabethan courtly entertainment of which it originally formed a part. However, he goes on, like earlier social historians of literature, to place these entertainments in the wider contexts of the court and of the distinctive "configurations of gender and power" in Elizabethan England.<sup>69</sup>

Still more difficult to categorize is the work of Greenblatt, which is sometimes described as contextual and sometimes as a text-oriented close reading. What he not infrequently does is to juxtapose, compare, and link literary and nonliterary texts from the same culture, such as *King Lear* and a pamphlet attacking exorcism. Greenblatt avoids the term *context*, preferring to speak of "circulation" or "negotiation," presumably because he wants to escape from or go beyond the old text-context debate. In a sense, what he is doing, sometimes brilliantly, is placing literary texts in the context of a whole culture. Hence Greenblatt is not so far as he may appear from Dilthey and his *Geistesgeschichte*, Greenblatt's "negotiation" not so far removed from the traditional idea of *Zusammenhang*, the New Historicism not so far from the old.

66. Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 5, 132; Jane F. Fulcher, "Concert et propagande politique en France au début du 20e siècle," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 55 (2000): 389–413, at 391.

67. Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 43–82.

68. Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts: The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

69. Louis Montrose, "Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture," in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 31–64.

In art history, especially the history of architecture and sculpture, discussions of the challenges posed by the site for which the work was designed are relatively traditional. What is new is the increasing concern with the original location of paintings, whether they were displayed in churches or in palaces, for instance, or whether they were to be seen alone or as part of an ensemble. Titian's *Assumption*, for example, painted for the church of the Frari in Venice, appears to have been designed to contrast with the apse behind it, while the composition of his Pesaro Madonna has been described as "a response to the challenge of a particular site." Botticelli's *Primavera* was originally the backboard of a bed.<sup>70</sup>

Increasing attention is also being paid to the microcontext of patronage. Thomas Kaufmann, for instance, in a book that is entitled *Court, Cloister and City* precisely in order to stress the importance of milieu, has noted shifts in the style of individual artists such as Veit Stoss or Tilman Riemenschneider according to the demands of the patron or the genre of a particular work. In other words, where an artist's style was once taken to be an expression of his or her personality, it is now interpreted, at least on occasion, as a kind of performance, the expression of a social role. Patrons too, King Matthias of Hungary for example, commissioned works in different styles—Gothic as well as Renaissance—on different occasions.<sup>71</sup> Another contextual approach to art is associated with one scholar in particular, Michael Baxandall, a former pupil of F. R. Leavis in Cambridge. In what Baxandall describes as a social history of pictorial style, focused on fifteenth-century Italy, his aim is to relate art to contemporary social practices, notably dancing and gauging barrels. In this respect his work runs parallel to the New Historicism.<sup>72</sup>

It is of course in intellectual history that the concern with context is today particularly explicit, as it has been for nearly half a century. It was in the fifties that an American historian of China, Benjamin Schwartz, argued for an approach to the history of ideas in terms of conscious responses to situations (he was referring not to Collingwood but to Mannheim).<sup>73</sup> At much the same time, in Cambridge, Peter Laslett was arguing the case for placing Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* in a "revised historical context" and treating it as "a response to urgent political circumstances" (the Exclusion Crisis of 1679–81).<sup>74</sup> It should be noted, though, that Laslett criticized his predecessors not so much for failing to

70. David Rosand, *Painting in Cinquecento Venice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 55, 63; Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 172.

71. Thomas Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister and City* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), 92–95.

72. Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

73. Benjamin Schwartz, "The Intellectual History of China," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 15–30.

74. Peter Laslett, ed., *Locke's Two Treatises* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 61, 67.

pay attention to the context of the book as for placing it in the wrong context (that of the revolution of 1688).

John Pocock, who was a student of Butterfield's at Cambridge in the 1950s, is more ambivalent about the idea of context. Already in 1965 he was warning his readers that the "slogan that ideas ought to be studied in their social and political context is, it seems to me, in danger of becoming a shibboleth" and stating his preference for working on political languages and paradigms.<sup>75</sup> All the same, his *Machiavellian Moment* (1975) discusses what he calls "the articulation of civic humanist concepts and values under the stresses of the Florentine predicament in the years 1494 to 1530," while his recent *Barbarism and Religion* (1999) sets out "to effect a series of contextualisations" of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.<sup>76</sup>

It is Quentin Skinner, who went to Cambridge a few years later than Pocock, whose work is most closely bound to the idea of context. He uses the term in various ways, primarily linguistic ("context of utterance"), in the second place intellectual, and in the third place political.<sup>77</sup> His approach has a somewhat different context from Pocock's, in the sense that Skinner's developed in reaction to—and against—the assumption of eternal wisdom to be found in American political science and Great Books programs at the time, as well as in reaction to Arthur Lovejoy's approach to the history of "unit-ideas" and to the political philosophy of John Plamenatz.<sup>78</sup>

In an adjoining field, the philosophy and history of science, the founding of the journal *Science in Context*, in 1987, offers another example of context-consciousness, soon followed by a collection of essays on *The Scientific Revolution in National Context* (1992), and by Steven Shapin's provocative *Social History of Truth* (1994).<sup>79</sup> A Cambridge journal, *Science in Context* may be seen as an attempt to emulate the historians of political thought—a return of a compliment, since both Pocock and Skinner have acknowledged debts to the work of Thomas Kuhn. However, the new journal needs to be placed in a disciplinary as well as a local context, and viewed as a response to, or a part of, a continuing debate over the status of scientific knowledge, whether it is genuinely universal or tied to specific

75. J. G. A. Pocock, "Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century," in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 104–47 at 105. Cf. David Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas* (The Hague: Dordrecht Nijhoff, 1985), 3.

76. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 333; see also Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1:13.

77. Skinner's point in a recent interview in *The Many Faces of History*, ed. Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke (London: Verso, forthcoming 2002).

78. Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" (1969, reprinted in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 29–67, at 30, 34, 55; see also Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1:xi; and Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.

79. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Scientific Revolution in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

cultures or microenvironments such as laboratories and clinics. The making of general scientific knowledge is now discussed in terms of decontextualization.<sup>80</sup>

### *Outstanding Problems*

The gains achieved by the rise of “context-sensitivity” across the humanities can hardly be doubted, from the solution of specific problems such as the underachievement of Kpelle children in mathematics to the questioning of simplistic assumptions about “timeless wisdom” or about human behavior as the blind following of cultural rules. The development of an increasingly rich vocabulary in this field, from *context-dependent* to *decontextualization* is a sign of increasing sensitivity, an equivalent for intellectuals of the multiplication of Eskimo words for snow or Zande terms for cattle. This is not to say, however, that approaches that claim to be contextual are exempt from criticism. So it may be useful to collect and link scattered criticisms of the different forms of “contextual analysis” surveyed so far.

To begin with, there is the problem of definition. We have inherited a rich vocabulary from our predecessors, but the key terms are employed in very different ways in different disciplines and even by individual scholars. The term *context*, like the related term *situation*, is not as clear as it may look. As we have seen, the concept of context is one that has been defined precisely or vaguely, narrowly or broadly, and employed in both a flexible and a rigid manner. In this respect, it resembles the concept of culture.<sup>81</sup> Marxists and non-Marxists (even anti-Marxists) employ the term. Context is often regarded as local, but the idea of a “global context” is also in circulation. It might well be asked, What is not context?

It is always possible, and often tempting, to be more contextual than thou, or, as the linguist Emmanuel Schegloff has noted, to use the term *context* to mean “what I noticed about your topic that you didn’t write about.”<sup>82</sup> Franz Boas, who led a kind of “contextual revolution” in museums, has been criticized for not being contextual enough, at least in his fieldwork, because his theory of culture “allowed him to remove bits of behaviour from their normal context for purposes of recording and analysis”—filming indoor rituals in the open, for instance.<sup>83</sup>

80. Ludvik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935; English trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Karin Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981); Jan Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79–102.

81. Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologist’s Account* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

82. Emanuel A. Schegloff, “In Another Context,” in Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*, 191–227, at 215.

83. Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 58.

Malinowski has sometimes been criticized for overemphasis on the local context, thus ignoring trade between ethnic groups, for example, and the presence of foreigners, from missionaries to tourists, in the “field.”<sup>84</sup>

Again, Jack Goody’s comparative studies of modes of communication placed certain phenomena, such as “structural amnesia,” in the context of the oral culture dominant in that place and time. However, Goody’s work has been criticized by the anthropologist Brian Street as insufficiently contextual for assuming that literacy is a neutral technology that can be detached from its social context. Street’s own ethnography, focused on a village in Iran, contrasted the religious literacy acquired in Koranic schools with the commercial literacy acquired elsewhere, concluding that “the ‘literacies’ acquired in different contexts may be quite different.”<sup>85</sup>

The problem of the boundary has recently been raised in a number of disciplines. Thus Richard Rorty urges his colleagues in philosophy to drop “the traditional opposition between context and thing contextualised.”<sup>86</sup> The archaeologist Ian Hodder asks how the boundary between object and context may be defined. For a given type of artifact found in cemeteries, for instance, is the context “a part of the body, the grave, a group of graves, the cemetery, the region or what?”<sup>87</sup> The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas argues that “objects and contexts not only define each other, but may change and disrupt each other.”<sup>88</sup> The historian Alain Boureau notes the danger of circularity: “Too often the context is implicitly or unconsciously constructed as a function of the explanation it is called on to provide.”<sup>89</sup>

This last comment raises the problem of the logical status of contexts. They are not found but selected or even constructed, sometimes consciously, by a process of abstracting from situations and isolating certain phenomena in order to understand them better.<sup>90</sup> What counts as a context depends on what one wishes to explain. There seems no end to the number of possible contexts. Discussing the use of language by children in the context of the family, for instance, Bernstein found himself distinguishing or constructing four further contexts, the regulative, the instructional, the imaginative, and the interpersonal. Likewise, the French linguist Françoise Armengaud distinguished four contexts of speech

84. Christopher Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11–12.

85. Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 154.

86. Richard Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualisation,” reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93–110. Hereafter cited as “Inquiry.”

87. Hodder, *Reading the Past*, 5.

88. Mitchell, “Situational Perspective,” 7, 18; Nicholas Thomas, *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 18.

89. Alain Boureau, “Richard Southern,” in *Past and Present* 165 (1999), at 221–22.

90. Mitchell, “Situational Perspective,” 7; cf. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts*, 137–41.

which she described as *circonstanciel*, *situationnel*, *interactionnel*, and *présuppositionnel*.<sup>91</sup> Where, if anywhere, can this process stop?

Another problem, which might be called the “problem of monopoly,” is raised by discussions of the contextual or situational method. Is it a method in the strict sense of the term, or more of a “perspective,” as Mitchell, for instance, calls it? If it is a method, is contextual analysis one method among alternatives (structural or formal analysis, for instance) or is it supposed to be the only method? Come to that, is hermeneutics a method?<sup>92</sup> In any case, it is obviously paradoxical to speak about a “contextual method” for studying one text, object, or situation after another, regardless of differences or circumstances. Like Protestantism—at least in the eyes of Bossuet—contextualism appears to be condemned to self-destruction by fragmentation.

In similar fashion, one might ask whether the targets of the contextualists are limited to rash or unqualified generalizations (as in the case of Guicciardini’s critique of Machiavelli), or whether they claim to undermine generalization altogether. If the claims being made are limited, it might be argued that too much fuss has been made about them in the last thirty years or so, since a concern with circumstances, contexts, and situations goes back, as we have seen, much further than the recent contextual turn. If, on the other hand, the claims are more ambitious, they become more vulnerable to the charge of what might be called “contextual reductionism.”<sup>93</sup> The problem is that strong or ambitious contextualism privileges difference over similarity. In his story about the man who produced a new work simply by copying out the text of *Don Quixote* in a different place and time, Jorge Luis Borges offers an extreme version of contextualism, resembling Robert Lowie’s earlier assertion, quoted above, of the non-identity of the identical in different psychological contexts.<sup>94</sup>

The point of the term *reductionism* is to emphasize what contextualism in the strong sense excludes. Contextualism appears to imply that there is no value in reading Plato if we do not live in an ancient Greek city-state, and to dismiss rather than to analyze the power of some literary or philosophical texts that appeal to readers from different cultures and periods.<sup>95</sup> A strong contextualism treats context as a prison from which there is no escape. This approach would eliminate not only comparison and contrast in anthropology, sociology, history,

91. Bernstein, “Social Class, Language and Socialisation” (1971), in *Class, Codes and Control*, 170–89; Françoise Armengaud, *Le pragmatique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

92. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960; English trans., London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

93. Peter Burke “The Rise of Literal-Mindedness,” *Common Knowledge* 2.2 (1993): 108–21.

94. Jorge L. Borges, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (1939; reprinted in *Obras*, ed. Carlo Frías [Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974], 446–50).

95. Cf. Kenneth Minogue, “Method in Intellectual History,” in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 176–93.

or literature, but also the use of general concepts, such as “feudalism,” “capitalism” or even “family” or “state.”

A focus on “situation” runs the risk of privileging the present and excluding tradition. Traditions have sometimes been viewed in too monolithic a manner. However, their study has been renewed by scholars sensitive to the ways in which—thanks in part to their inner conflicts—these traditions are capable of being adapted or reconstructed, consciously or unconsciously, as circumstances change.<sup>96</sup> In its turn, an awareness of the power of tradition, “the past in the present,” may help us understand how people from different cultures react differently in the “same” situation, for example in an encounter between Europeans and Americans in the 1490s.

Since there are no simple solutions to the problems briefly evoked here, a formal conclusion to this essay is inappropriate. It is better to end with informal remarks aimed at inciting further discussion and defending imprecision, multiplicity, and decontextualization.

It is probably too late to advocate distinguishing relatively narrow *contexts* from wider *situations*—or vice versa—by means of different words, as might once have been useful.<sup>97</sup> In any case, it may be unwise, as we have seen, to expect too much precision from the term *context*, to make it take more weight than it can bear. The term is best used to refer to phenomena that are not in focus at a given moment: especially, perhaps, those that are just out of focus. The lack of sharp definition, the open-endedness of the concept, has advantages as well as disadvantages and does not make the term meaningless—for as a lawyer has observed, “it is relatively easy to say what ‘the contextual approach’ is not; it is not narrow-minded, it does not treat law as being ‘just there’ to be studied in isolation, it is opposed to formalism.”<sup>98</sup>

Although it is always wise to think contextually, contextual analysis is best treated as one method rather than “the” method of cultural or intellectual history. In any case, we need to think of contexts in the plural. To do so is not only to use the word in the plural form but to remember to ask, In what other contexts might this word, action, object be placed? What looks, when one first discovers it, like “the” context for an idea, object, statement, or event generally turns out to be no more than “a” context.

It is obviously necessary, for instance, to distinguish contextualization on the part of cultural analysts (Mitchell’s “setting”) from contextualization as an everyday practice by participants in the culture being analyzed (Mitchell’s “sit-

96. Jan C. Heesterman, “India and the Inner Conflict of Tradition” (1973; reprinted in *The Inner Conflict of Traditions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985], 10–25).

97. Mitchell, “Situational Perspective,” distinguishes “a situation defined by the actors” from “a setting defined by the analyst” and from wider “contexts.”

98. Twining, *Law in Context*, 43–44.

uation”). Sociolinguists in particular have shown that participants are aware of what analysts call “contextualization cues” (Goffman uses a similar phrase, “framing cues”). The degree of this awareness may vary with the culture; it has been argued, for example, that social context is more important in defining forms of linguistic politeness in Japanese than it is in English and some other languages.<sup>99</sup>

As for the analysts, the contexts that they select or construct may be literary, linguistic, social, cultural, political, or material; some of them more literal, more precise, or more local, and others more metaphorical, vaguer, or broader. There is no one correct context. What can be done is to try to place the narrower context within a wider and wider context that might be represented as a series of concentric circles, recognizing in principle that an infinite series of such circles may be distinguished and in practice that there is no clear place to stop.<sup>100</sup> Hence Mitchell as an anthropologist speaks of “nested contexts” such as the face-to-face situation, its social environment, and the wider social system. As the contextual theologian Bernard Lonergan puts it, “The context of the word is the sentence. The context of the sentence is the paragraph. The context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author’s *opera omnia*, his life and times, the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.”<sup>101</sup>

The disadvantage of this concise and elegant formulation of what intellectual historians have been trying to do since Dilthey’s day is that it treats as unproblematic the nature of the links between different contexts, notably the immediate, narrow or “microcontext” and the further, broader or “macrocontext.” In sociolinguistics, where so much attention has been given to context, there remains a gulf between the many microstudies and wider generalizations—generalizations about national styles of speaking, for example.<sup>102</sup>

The gap between context-centered and tradition-centered approaches, mentioned earlier, might be bridged by the suggestion that cultural traditions encourage individuals and groups to adopt particular schemata, stereotypes, or clichés and so to perceive or define situations in particular ways.<sup>103</sup> The constraining power of schemata in the short term, but also their adaptability in the long term, may be illustrated again and again from studies of encounters between

99. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 186; John Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 130–52; see also Goffman’s “Contextualization and Understanding,” in Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*, 229–52; Yoshiko Matsumoto, “Politeness and Conversational Universals: Observations from Japanese,” *Multilingua* 8 (1989): 207–21.

100. Aaron V. Cicourel, “The Interpenetration of Communicative Contexts,” in Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*, 291–310, at 309.

101. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1972), 163.

102. Suzanne Romaine, *Language in Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

103. Peter Burke, “The Jargon of the Schools,” in Peter Burke and Roy Porter, eds., *Languages and Jargons* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 22–41.

different cultures. The work of Marshall Sahlins on Captain Cook in Hawaii is exemplary in this respect.<sup>104</sup>

Recent discussions in the history and philosophy of science have been concerned with a similar problem, that of the means by which knowledge that was originally local, produced in a specific context, is rendered general.<sup>105</sup> What makes these studies exemplary—provided they are themselves adapted to new contexts—is that they provide conceptual space for recontextualization and for the phenomenon variously known as “decontextualization” and “disembedding.” To provide this conceptual space is both to criticize and to employ the concept of context, to develop or adapt it in response to challenges.

It is worth remembering that these points are not as new as they may seem. Collingwood, for example, was critical of the idea “that anything torn from its context is thereby mutilated or falsified,” claiming on the contrary that an “act of thought” can “sustain itself through a change of context and revive in a different one.”<sup>106</sup> The decontextualizing effect of writing has long been discussed, making it easier to take ideas out of the face-to-face situations in which they were originally formulated in order to apply them elsewhere.

All the same, the recent interest in the phenomenon of recontextualization or “reframing” is surely unparalleled.<sup>107</sup> In anthropology and sociology, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s notion of *bricolage* and Michel de Certeau’s discussion of everyday consumption as a form of production or creativity both depend on the notion of recontextualization.<sup>108</sup> The same concept might be used to mediate in the Goody-Street debate on the contexts of literacy, encouraging a closer analysis of the literacy package, distinguishing between skills that can be “transferred” from the Koranic school to the shop and those that resist adaptation.<sup>109</sup> Rorty goes so far as to describe the whole of philosophical inquiry as recontextualization, on the grounds that (generalizing the point made by Evans-Pritchard about the Azande) “a belief is what it is only by virtue of its position in the web.”<sup>110</sup> A similar point might be made about translation.

One might go still further and define originality, innovation, invention, or creativity in terms of the capacity to recontextualize; and this was Arthur Koestler’s point in his study of the “act of creation.” One of his most telling examples was that of the wine-press, observed by Gutenberg, “lifted out of its context” and employed for a new purpose: printing books. Recontextualization, in other words, is creative adaptation rather than invention *ex nihilo*.<sup>111</sup>

104. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

105. Golinski, *Natural Knowledge*, 91–102.

106. *Ibid.*, 297–98.

107. On reframing, see Phillips, *Society and Sentiment*, 12–14, 20–21.

108. Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien* 2d ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

109. Street, *Literacy*, 155.

110. Rorty, esp. “Inquiry,” esp. 94, 98.

111. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (1964; rev. ed., London: Hutchinson, 1969), 123.

Problems remain—the question, for example, of whether certain ideas, artifacts, or practices are inherently more or less “mobile,” shall we say, than others, and of the extent to which recontextualization depends on agency, creativity, the power to adapt. The most acute problem of all is the impossibility of criticizing a key concept or concepts without employing it or them. This recurrent problem in intellectual history may be illustrated from Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In order to make the point that priests were not fundamentally different from ordinary people, Luther used the language of priesthood. The moral of the story is perhaps that we should not be looking for a new term or set of terms to replace *context*, terms that would probably generate new problems in their turn. It is more realistic to employ the word in the plural, to place it mentally in inverted commas, and to do our best to contextualize it, in all the many senses of that term.