

Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization

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Intellectuals are people who produce decontextualized ideas.

—Randall Collins¹

FOR INTELLECTUAL HISTORIANS, NO MORE powerful defense of the importance of contextual explanation has been launched than that mounted a generation ago by Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and their colleagues in the so-called Cambridge school of intellectual history.² Targeting the anachronistic presentism that encouraged historians to designate past thinkers precursors of later movements that were not yet in self-conscious existence, Skinner urged them to situate intellectuals and texts in their immediate contexts of generation and reception. Arguing against the fallacy of attributing a timeless essence to concepts or ideas that emerged only in particular historical circumstances, he warned against isolating even perennial keywords, such as those traced by Raymond Williams, from the changing discursive constellations in which they were situated.³ Scorning the quest for a useable past that would be relevant to current concerns, he urged historians to honor the radical otherness of the past.

It was crucial, Skinner argued, to recover the original matrix of conventions and assumptions out of which a text emerged and into which it was inserted. The intention of the author could not be understood from the words in the text alone, what speech act theorists called their locutionary meaning, but could only be recovered when their illocutionary or performative force was also grasped. That is, texts were meant to *do* something, to have an effect on the world, not merely to describe it or express the ideas of their authors. They were communicative *acts* dependent on the conventions and usages of their day in order to be effective. They contained arguments meant to persuade, not merely propositions about the world or expressions of inner states of mind. Whether or not they achieved what they set out to do—their perlocutionary effect—was another question. But unless we appreciated what an

author like, say, Hobbes or Locke had intended to accomplish with his intervention in the discourse of his time, we were in danger of missing the true historical meaning of his efforts. In other words, every text had to be understood finitely, but holistically, as a response to the unanswered or unsatisfactorily answered questions of the day, not as a contribution to an omnitemporal conversation outside of any historical context.

Although there may well be a surplus of meaning in a text beyond the author's intention—a point Skinner willingly granted⁴—the historically productive point of departure had to be the intentionality of the author understood as embedded in a particular force field of discursive relations. Radical contextualism, which has become such a bugaboo for philosophers anxious to avoid relativism and defend transcendental truths, was thus not a problem for historians dedicated to telling particular, contingent stories about the past.⁵ Following the lead of anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, with his celebrated exhortation to interpret the dense webs of relatively coherent meaning that we call culture, historians should set out to make sense of what once might seem like isolated facts, events, actions, and ideas within the horizon of relations in which they were situated. The more saturated the context—the thicker the description, in the phrase that Geertz took from Weber and made famous—the richer the interpretive and explanatory pay-off.

Although by no means without his critics—and we will come to some of their objections in a moment—Skinner's general brief for contextualization as the historian's chief *modus operandi* has been widely influential, and not only among intellectual historians. Thus, to take a salient example, the social historian William Sewell Jr. in his recent *Logics of History*, claims that historians must take seriously the heterogeneity of time, respecting the differences that separate one period from another, and adds: "Temporal heterogeneity also implies that understanding or explaining social practices requires *historical contextualization*. We cannot know what an act or utterance means and what its consequences might be without knowing the semantics, the technologies, the conventions—in brief, the logics—that characterize the world in which the action takes place. Historians tend to explain things not by subsuming them under a general or 'covering' law but by relating them to their context."⁶ Or to take another typical example, John Lewis Gaddis writes in *The Landscape of History*, "Causes always have contexts, and to know the former we must understand the latter. Indeed I would go so far as to define the word 'context' as the dependency of sufficient causes upon necessary causes; or, in Bloch's terms, of the exceptional upon the general. For while context does not directly *cause* what happens, it can certainly determine consequences."⁷

But what it may mean to “relate” an idea, a practice, or an event to its context is by no means self-evident, nor is the claim that exceptions “depend” on general conditions. As a result, a number of cogent objections have been introduced to the overreliance on contextualization as the privileged method of historical inquiry, understood to extend beyond the sphere of intellectual history narrowly defined. First of all, the issue of how historians can reliably reconstruct the past context that will serve as the ultimate explanatory foundation of their narratives has been raised by those who argue that only through the textual residues of the past can we recover putative contexts.⁸ The result, they point out, is an inevitable circularity between texts and contexts that prevents the latter from becoming the prior determining factor. In other words, we may not be able to understand a text or document without contextualizing it, but contexts are themselves preserved only in textual or documentary residues, even if we expand the latter to include nonlinguistic traces of the past. And those texts need to be interpreted in the present to establish the putative past context that will then be available to explain still other texts.

Because the interpretation of these texts and documents, so runs a second objection, has to take place in the present, it will be necessary to employ theoretical tools or at least hermeneutic insights brought to the table by the contemporary historian. The documents that reveal contexts never simply speak for themselves without at least being questioned by their present readers. Benedetto Croce’s oft-repeated dictum that “all history is contemporary history” implies that no past context is manifest without its current reconstruction, which is an active not passive process. As Hayden White has noted, “Every contextualization requires, as a condition of its enablement as a representational or an explanatory strategy, a formalist component, which is to say, a theoretical model on the basis of which, first, to distinguish contexts from the entities inhabiting them; second, to generate hypotheses about the nature of the relations between the entities and the contexts thus distinguished; and third, to discriminate between radical, primary, and determining transformations of these relationships and what are only secondary, superficial, or local changes in them.”⁹ Skinner’s use of the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle would be an example of the tacit formalism of which White speaks. It certainly wasn’t in the vocabulary of the early modern figures whose illocutionary intentions he wants to recover.

Moreover, despite the exhortation to honor the historical uniqueness of the period we are studying, which, as we’ve seen, motivated Skinner’s persuasive denunciation of precursoritis, the assumption that we can locate the proper explanatory context after the fact may also tacitly be

at odds with the self-understanding of the participants at the time, a self-understanding that by definition lacks the perspective of the later historian. As the anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano has noted, "Whatever their objective claims, contextualizations are never neutral. They always have an imperative function; they tell us how the exchange they 'enclose' is to be read. They confirm, thereby, the theoretical underpinning of—the rationalizations for—such instructions."¹⁰ Skinner, to be sure, has willingly conceded to his critics that "we inevitably approach the past in the light of contemporary paradigms and presuppositions, the influence of which may easily serve to mislead us at every turn."¹¹ But as the word "mislead" suggests, he assumes there are ways to avoid those paradigms and presuppositions to gain access to the original intention of the authors he studies: "Such skepticism strikes me as unhelpfully hyperbolic, especially when we reflect that even animals are sometimes capable of recovering the intentions with which people act."¹²

A still more telling criticism concerns the question of how to determine what the relevant context will be, if we acknowledge the impossibility of positing a single, homogeneous discursive whole in which texts might be situated. As Dominick LaCapra has warned, "overcontextualization often occludes the problem of the very grounds on which to motivate a selection of pertinent contexts. . . . The farther back one goes in time, the less obvious the contexts informing discourse tend to become, and the more difficult it may be, at least in a technical, philological sense, to reconstruct them."¹³ In other words, there is no reason to assume that the map of relevant contexts will look like a Russian matryoshka doll in which one is comfortably nested in the other. The passage from micro- to macrocontexts is by no means always very smooth. Instead, it might be more plausible to acknowledge competing and nonhierarchically ranged contexts of varying size and gravitational force, which produced an overdetermined effect irreducible to any one dominant contextual influence.¹⁴

Issues of scale are also hard to ignore. That is, is the most potent context something as global as an historical epoch or chronotope? Or is the proper level that of a language, a religion, a class or a nation-state? Or do we have to look at more proximate contexts, say the precise social, political, or educational institutions in which the historical actor was embedded, the generation to which he or she belonged, or the family out of which he or she emerged? Can we make sense of, say, Freud's invention of psychoanalysis in terms of his training in medicine and Darwinian biology, his background as an assimilated Jew, his anger at his unheroic father, his acquaintance with literary traditions of the unconscious, his disillusionment with liberal politics and the image of

rational man on which it was based, his strange friendship with Wilhelm Fliess or the crisis of the bourgeois nuclear family? All of these explanations, and many more, have been at one time or another adduced to unlock the mystery of his creativity. Is there any way to assign their relative weight or must we simply accept Freud's own notion of overdetermination and say they were all in one way or another at play? Or to put it differently, may there be a dynamic force field of contending contexts, both synchronous and diachronous, that never fully resolves itself into a single meaningful whole with a clear order of influence?¹⁵ Indeed, the very assumption that there is a single, monolithic "text" to be contextualized falters when we acknowledge that it may itself vary according to the context(s) of its reception, which often alters its boundaries and even content.

Skinner himself may have prematurely foreclosed the issue by contending that, however complex the notion of a context may be, "we can readily single out the most crucial element in it. This is the fact that all serious utterances are characteristically intended as acts of communication."¹⁶ Such a restrictive definition, however, makes very difficult any broader contextualist explanation that tries to go beyond the conscious intentions of actors to communicate meaning, as for example, one that takes seriously the concept of ideology. Ideology is, to be sure, a highly fraught concept with many difficulties of its own, but to the extent that it interprets historical actions and beliefs in terms of hidden motives—for example, a covert agenda of promoting self-interest in the guise of universalism or a defensive response to psychological strain—it opens up the question of how to explain ideas and actions that seem to lack self-evident rationality. Skinner borrows a principle from Weber to address this challenge: "Unless we begin by assuming the agent's rationality, we leave ourselves with no means of explaining his behavior, or even of seeing exactly what there is to explain about it, if it should happen that he is not acting rationally."¹⁷ But of course, such a response opens up the question of which standard of rationality we are attributing to the past agent and which standard we are employing in judging his actions as irrational today. For surely, there is no self-evident transcendental version of rationality that can be applied ahistorically and across cultures under all circumstances. Once again we are in danger of imposing present criteria on a past, which cannot be approached by completely bracketing our own beliefs, experiences, assumptions, values, and prejudices.

Another troubling issue, which is raised by Skinner's suggestive adoption of speech act theory, concerns the issue of dialogical—or even pluralological—rather than monological discursive interactions. It may not be sufficient to posit a one-directional illocutionary performance,

situated in a constellation of conventions, as the basis of the recovery of an explanatory context. For there are always multidirectional interactions that produce the meanings that emerge, or impede the ones that fail to emerge, from an event or episode. That is, one intention is always in play with others and actions always engage with other actions, prior and posterior, which can easily lead to unintended consequences.¹⁸ The level of pragmatic utterance is never fully beholden to the deeper level of structural regularities, linguistic or cultural, that constrain but cannot fully determine it. Another way to describe the effect of this dialectic is to stress the agonistic, competitive quality of many speech acts that are not necessarily designed to bring about a consensus or a Gadamerian fusion of horizons. At its most extreme, the effect is the heteroglossia of which Bakhtin has made us so aware, a condition of multiple, competing voices that may well invade the consciousness of individual speakers, rendering their own subjectivities less than perfectly integral and dispersing their intentions. From the point of view of the later historian, the difficulty this raises is the instability of the unified context in which what is to be explained can be meaningfully placed. A dialogic, often agonistic context is one always already fractured, even if all participants are likely to be observing metalevel rules and conventions that limit the chaos and turn noise into some degree of successful communication.

Many of these criticisms will be familiar to those who have followed the debate over contextualization and its limits stimulated in large measure by the very impressive body of work generated by the Cambridge School. In most cases, they focus on difficulties faced by the contemporary historian in gaining access to the past and reflecting on the evidence that exists in the present: how to establish contexts if their residues are themselves in texts that need to be stabilized and interpreted; how to decide which contexts are pertinent and provide plausible explanations; how to articulate the relationship among the sometimes incompatible contexts that might be adduced to explain a text, how to acknowledge the theoretical underpinnings, explicit or not, of our reconstruction of the past; how to be sensitive to the dialogical and even heteroglossic nature of the contexts that we do decide are most important; how to balance a belief that actors in the past are rational with a fear that the standard of rationality is one that we impose upon them in the present, and so on.

There is, however, another vital consideration that brings us back to the actual historical moment when events, actions, and thoughts themselves occurred rather than letting us focus solely on the challenges faced by contemporary historical reconstructions of that moment. It involves what might be called the nature of the historical reality that contextualization purports to explain. For rather than assuming that all

actions, texts, figures, or episodes in the past can be equally elucidated by embedding them in what we have seen William Sewell call the “logics” of their context of production, we might usefully distinguish, at least heuristically, between those that might be and those that might not. To help us understand the distinction, I want to turn to the complex discourse about the “event” in recent French thought, which has introduced some fundamental challenges to the assumption that what happens in history is either an exemplar of a deeper, abiding structure or an element in a meaningful narrative in which every moment can be understood as an episode in that narrative.

A number of leading thinkers in the wake of what came to be called “the events” of 1968 expressed dissatisfaction with the hegemony of structuralism in France, which in the field of history was most explicitly identified with the so-called *Annales* School. Instead, they began to revise their estimation of the value of the very *histoire événementielle* that Fernand Braudel, Lucien Febvre, and their colleagues at the *Annales* had seen as superficial and of little interest. Philosophers like Lyotard, Deleuze, Nancy, Derrida, Foucault, and Badiou developed extensive analyses of “the event,” which often drew on the insights of earlier theorists like Kierkegaard, Benjamin, Schmitt, and Heidegger. This is not the place to spell out all the implications of their recovery of this vexed concept, a task I have tackled elsewhere.¹⁹ Suffice it to say that their target was not only the recurrent patterns beneath the surface that the structuralists had sought, but also the conventional emplotted stories valued by traditional historians, who by and large understood events, at least significant ones, as hinge moments in their coherent narratives. Although often they imbued the “events” they celebrated with an almost religious aura of importance—Kierkegaard’s notion of the Absolute, Benjamin’s idea of messianic “now time,” and Heidegger’s concept of an *Ereignis* were often among their inspirations—their ruminations have implications for the more prosaic issue of historical contextualization.

To understand those implications, I want to turn to a lesser known French theorist, who has recently written with great insight on the same theme but without the quasi-religious, metaphysical pathos of many of the others, Claude Romano. In *L’Événement et le monde* and *L’Événement et le temps*, the first published in 1998, the second a year later,²⁰ Romano provided a fine-grained phenomenological analysis of the event as opposed to a mere happening or occurrence. Developing what he calls an “evential hermeneutics,” he argues that there is a link between “event” and “advent,” which in French also invokes the future (“avenir”). Advent, moreover, must be understood in connection with the unforetold adventure that it spawns. Rather than instances of a static ontology, events *cum*

advents are more like what Nietzsche called “lightning flashes,” which are radical breaks in the status quo. They happen without intentionality or preparation, befalling us rather than being caused by us.

How do they relate to the larger context into which they are inserted, a context which Romano calls “inner-worldly?” “It is always within a world, embedded in a causal framework,” he writes, “that an event is able to appear with its own meaning, interpreted in the light of other events that determine its own meaning” (EW 34). Derived from a welter of prior possibilities, its context can be understood as “a particular *unity of meaning* in light of which events become comprehensible in their mutual articulation, a horizon of meaning through which they are illuminated—that is, as a thoroughly hermeneutic structure” (EW 34). That contextual structure is one of essential iterability, in which repetition rather than novelty prevails. Here he sounds very much in tune with the general program of the Cambridge School and other historical contextualists, and as such may be vulnerable to the same objections we have encountered above.

But Romano then develops his argument in a very different direction. All events might seem to be comprehensible in terms of their enabling contexts, “were it not for events that radically upend their contexts and, far from being submitted to a horizon of prior meanings, are themselves the origin of meaning for any interpretation, in that they can be understood less from the world that precedes them than from the posterity to which they give rise” (EW 38). World-establishing rather than inner-worldly, they are “an-archic” in the sense that they have no prior *archēs* determining their meaning or producing their occurrence. Although an event is not utterly free of antecedent causation, its “causes do not explain it, or rather, if they ‘explain’ it, what they give a reason for is *only ever* the fact and not the *event* in its eventual sense” (EW 41). For Romano, “evential” as opposed to mere “evental” in the normal use of the term means bringing a cargo of new possibilities with it, which provide novelty and openness to a process that otherwise would always reduce to repetition of the same. To give an obvious example, no matter how much Christians looked for prefigural anticipations in what they called the “Old Testament,” the events described in the “New Testament” were radical ruptures that opened up a future that was very different from the past.

Rather, however, than being utterly omnitemporal and outside of history, as some celebrants of events, such as Kierkegaard, assume, they should be understood as inaugurating their own history, as advents that open up possible adventures in a future not yet determined. Unlike a historical fact, which can be neatly identified with a single date in a

timeline of comparable facts, events are “not so much inscribed *in* time, as they are what *opens* time or *temporalizes* it” (EW 46). Rather than the present or the past, their temporality is that of a future still to be realized, a latency that may or may not become manifest, a meaning that is still deferred. Or to put it in the terms of the speech act theory introduced by Skinner, the perlocutionary effect of texts that qualify as cultural events is irreducible to the illocutionary intent of their authors. As Romano puts it, “an ‘intended meaning’ and a language must ‘precede’ an act of speech, which would be impossible without them. However, speech, like an *event*, is irreducible to its own ‘conditions’ and annuls them in arising” (EW 165).

Although Romano doesn’t develop this idea, there may also be another way that events open up possibilities, ironically for the past, not the future. In discussing the ways in which radical catastrophes challenge an evolutionary notion of historical development in which everything that happens is already prepared by what preceded it, Slavoj Žižek reverses the normal order of first possibilities and then choices. Instead catastrophic events—and one might argue just as easily emancipatory or redemptive ones—may have the opposite effect in which a choice or act “retroactively opens up its own possibility: the idea that the emergence of a radically New retroactively changes the past—not the actual past, of course (we are not in the realm of science fiction or counterfactual narratives), but past possibilities, or to put it in more formal terms, the value of modal propositions about the past.”²¹

Events, in addition, happen for Romano not to subjects, strictly speaking, but to “advenants.” Whereas the concept of a subject generally implies an enduring identity beneath all the accidents that befall it, an “advenant” comes to be only in the very process of becoming that allows a new event to be in excess of what has already occurred. What happens to the advenant is existentially transformative, because the event that occurs cannot be indifferently witnessed from the outside; instead, he or she is fully implicated in it: “To be implicated oneself in what happens (to us) is to be capable of *experience* in the most fundamental sense, which does not refer to a modality of theoretical knowledge understood as the way a subject and object face each other, but rather undergoing a passage from self to self, which is inseparable from a constitutive alteration” (EW 52).²² The world produced by events is thus one from which a more or less unified subject may, to be sure, emerge, but it is not one that he or she, already integrated, can intend or create. And indeed when such a subject does emerge, it means the return of innerworldly repetition, for “an *advenant* can only be characterized as a ‘subjectivity’ when he is no longer himself: an *advenant*. Subjectivity is precisely that posture

where he holds himself back from the possibility of being touched and upended by any event whatsoever" (*EW* 212).

The quintessential instance of an event is birth itself, which is never constituted by the one who is born, but is always something that happens to "it," when it is not yet a subject, not yet an identity, not yet autonomous. Although for others it may be an innerworldly fact actively intended by the parents who bring it about and capable of being witnessed as such, for the one born, it is always a heteronomous gift, an origin that is never self-produced, never without its impersonal character. As such, it is the template for all later experiences of real events, which ironically free the self from its subjection to the past, from being a mere "subject" with its connotation of subjection.

The alteration takes place not only in the advenant, whose experience of events is transformative, but also in the world itself. To the extent that an event is irreducible to its enabling context, intellectual or artistic events are also best grasped in terms of what they make possible rather than what makes them possible. According to Romano, a work of art "cannot be understood in its singularity except from the posterity to which it gives rise, the refashioning it brings about in the forms, themes, and techniques of a period. A work of art cannot be understood within the artistic context in which it is born, which it necessarily transcends if it is an original work" (*EW* 62). Ironically, it can be understood from a contextual point of view only as "im-possible" in the sense that it is not merely the realization of the prior possibilities that already exist in the world; instead, it is the source of utterly new possibilities that may in turn either be realized or surpassed by new events.

Although he doesn't explicitly draw on their work, Romano is expanding on insights that go back at least as far as Kant and were developed in the twentieth century by thinkers as different as Bloch and Arendt. In his efforts to avoid the determinist implications of overly rationalist metaphysics, especially Spinoza's, and allow a space for human ethical choice—a battle he fought with great determination during the so-called "pantheism debate" of the late eighteenth century²³—Kant had insisted that a causality of freedom can interrupt the mechanical causality of nature, bringing something new into the world. Bloch's utopian philosophy of hope was oriented toward the future, finding in the past prefigural traces of what had not yet come rather than origins to be repeated. The "novum," he argued, heralded something radically new that intervened in the mundane course of history. Arendt saw that intervention happening in the birth of every new human: "Every man, being created in the singular, is a new beginning by virtue of his birth; if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined

men, not, like the Greeks as mortals, but as ‘natales,’ and he would have defined the freedom of the Will not as the *liberum arbitrium*, the free choice between willing and nilling, but as the freedom of which Kant speaks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.²⁴ Although events, as Romano describes them, are not deliberately willed, they nonetheless resist being absorbed by a prior explanatory context or tied to a causal chain. Nor are they determined by a telos like death, as Heidegger had assumed in stressing the importance of *Sein-zum-Tode* for *Dasein*.

For the historian, the upshot of all this is that for the class of extraordinary happenings that justify the label “event”—and it seems likely they are a small, if significant, minority—contextual explanation, however we construe it, is never sufficient. As Romano puts it, “understanding events is always apprehending them on a horizon of meaning that they have opened themselves, in that they are strictly nonunderstandable in the light of their explanatory context” (*EW* 152). If this is true for events in general, it is perhaps more so for those we might call events in intellectual history. As Randall Collins writes in the opening words of the first chapter of his massive *Sociology of Philosophies*, cited above as the epigraph of this paper: “Intellectuals are people who produce decontextualized ideas.” And he continues, “These ideas are meant to be true or significant apart from any locality, and apart from anyone concretely putting them into practice. . . . Intellectual products are felt, at least by their creators and consumers, to belong to a realm which is peculiarly elevated. . . . We can recognize them as sacred objects in the strongest sense; they inhabit the same realm, make the same claims to ultimate reality, as religion.”²⁵

This may seem an odd way to begin a thousand-page book on the sociology of intellectual change throughout the ages and across all cultures, and in fact Collins wants to show that chains of interaction rituals are the key to intellectual life, including creativity. But insofar as he alerts us to the ambitions of intellectuals to produce ideas that transcend their context of generation, he affirms the insight that we have derived from Romano: it may be insufficient to reduce those ideas to little more than a reshuffling of the cards dealt by any context. Of course, ambition and realization are not equivalent, and certainly the desire to produce radically new, decontextualized ideas is not always successfully realized. Events, as the French discourse which includes Romano freely acknowledges, are rare and not always easy to identify. To the extent that the vast majority of historical happenings are “innerwordly” in his sense of the term, little, if anything is lost by treating most ideas in the ways that the Cambridge school insists we should: as comprehensible in their context of origin and immediate reception.

But for those ideas that may justifiably be called intellectual events or for the rare figures who are intellectual legislators of their age, it may be wise to refrain from restricting our gaze to the contexts out of which they emerged. For as Nietzsche noted in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "The greatest events and thoughts (and the greatest thoughts are the greatest events) are comprehended most slowly. The generations which are their contemporaries do not experience, do not 'live through' them—they live alongside them."²⁶ The historical meaning of a Machiavelli, a Locke, or a Hobbes may, *pace* Skinner, be inextricably tied to the posterity they generated and may continue to inspire. Insofar as the concept of posterity always implies an infinity of possible future instantiations, the contexts of their reception, those teleological rather than constitutive forces in their field of meaning, must be understood as a perpetually receding horizon.

Willing to talk of some ideas as "great" does not, however, mean that they are somehow eternal, omnitemporal, and outside of history, as some philosophers might assume. The alternative to contextualization is not necessarily transcendentalization. Such might be the implication of the covertly religious definition of an event as an interruption of the Absolute into ephemeral temporality. But if we adopt the more secular version articulated by Romano, we can realize that the time of these events is that of a future still to come, or perhaps even better, a Blochian "non-contemporaneity" that is the time both of "no longer" and "not yet." Like any "natal" entering the world, they are almost all pure possibility and little, if any, actuality.

But as in the case of the *advenant* who turns into a settled subject, their adventure may come to an end and they can be reabsorbed into a new context of reception which diminishes their power to change the world. Nothing is forever new, after all. So there is a perennial role for extrinsic and well as intrinsic analysis, contextual as well as textual interpretation. Despite all of the questions raised above about the challenges of creating a plausible method of contextualization, it should also not be forgotten that the notion of a text is no less fraught with internal tensions and difficulties. Indeed, once we put the concept of "text" under pressure and sort out all the possible ways to treat them, it raises as many questions as "context."²⁷ For, as we have already noted, the two may not always be so easily separated. Thus, to take one example, based on a hasty reading of the now notorious sound bite that "there is nothing outside of a text," deconstruction is often taken to be a radically textualist method, but Derrida has also been called a "contextualist *par excellence*" because of his dissolution of texts in a boundless sea of intertextuality.²⁸

This characterization comes from a recent book by F. R. Ankersmit called *Sublime Historical Experience*, which introduces some further considerations on contextualization. Implicitly tying together the two parts of my argument—the difficulties faced by the later historian establishing the pertinent context and the mixed reality of historical occurrences themselves, some innerworldly, others genuine events—it will help us reach a conclusion. As we have seen, Romano argues that the advenant, as opposed to the subject, is capable of a more fundamental experience in which genuine transformation can take place. According to Ankersmit, drawing on the ruminations of the distinguished Dutch historian of the late Middle Ages, Johan Huizinga, there is also a chance for the historian to have a comparable experience, which he calls sublime. It somehow gets us in touch with residues of the past in a more direct way than is normally the case. Such an experience is one that goes beyond the disinterested activity of subjects gazing at objects from afar, either spatially or temporally. As in the case of the advenant described by Romano, it is one in which the person is deeply and intimately implicated. “Context,” Ankersmit writes, “is a term belonging to a world containing subjects and objects, and it loses its meaning and significance when there is only experience, as in the case in historical experience. And since historical experience is far from being meaningless, our conclusion must be that there *is* meaning without context. Historical experience gives us the fissures of sublimity in the web of meaning and context—and hence the authenticity of historical experience that Huizinga had so rightly and eloquently claimed for it.”²⁹

Ankersmit concedes that such sublime or authentic experiences enjoyed by the historian bypass the issue of valid knowledge about the past. It is not epistemological plausibility he is after, but rather the possibility of heightened intensity in our relations with the residues of the past. For many historians, of course, such a goal is not paramount; as disinterested subjects looking from afar at past objects, they continue to have cognitive intentions and hope to provide explanations of what happened in ways that respect the unbridgeable gap between then and now. But if we take seriously the claim made by Romano that a genuine event in the past only realizes itself in the possibilities it unleashes in an undetermined future and Nietzsche’s argument that great ideas need a delay before their power is fully actualized, then such experiences may seem less implausible. Events in the strong sense posited by Romano and other recent French theorists are rare occurrences in the past. Sublime historical experiences are no less infrequent in the present. But when the two come together, no contextual explanation can contain their explosive power.

NOTES

- 1 Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998), 19.
- 2 For a convenient summary of the main arguments of Skinner and his school, see the essays collected in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988). For another critical account, which distinguishes between Skinner's stress on intentionality expressed through prevailing conventions and Pocock's on linguistic paradigms without authorial intention, see Mark Bevir, "The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation," in *Begriffsgeschichte, Diskursgeschichte, Metapherngeschichte*, ed. Hans Erich Bödecker (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002). Among other distinguished historians and political theorists often included in the school are John Dunn, Richard Tuck, Anthony Pagden, Stefan Collini, and David Armitage.
There have, of course, been other prominent exponents of contextualization in intellectual history, for example, Fritz Ringer, who draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. For a discussion of his position, see Fritz K. Ringer, "The Intellectual Field, Intellectual History and the Sociology of Knowledge," *Theory and Society* 19, no. 3 (1990): 269–94; Charles Lemert, "The Habits of Intellectuals"; Martin Jay, "Fieldwork and Theorizing in Intellectual History," *Theory and Society* 19, no. 3 (1990): 269–321; and Ringer, "Rejoinder to Charles Lemert and Martin Jay," *Theory and Society* 19, no. 3 (1990): 323–34.
- 3 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976). A later edition appeared in 1983, which tacitly revised some of the assumptions criticized by Skinner in "Language and Social Change," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*.
- 4 Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Meaning of Texts," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 76.
- 5 Perhaps the one place in which the relativist implications of radical contextualism have vexed historians is in the history of science. In particular, Thomas Kuhn's work a generation ago on scientific revolutions undercut the time-honored notion of scientific progress towards a closer and closer approximation of the truth about the natural world.
- 6 William H. Sewall, Jr., *The Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 10.
- 7 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 97.
- 8 See, for example, Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives*, ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982).
- 9 Hayden White, "Formalist and Contextualist Strategies in Historical Explanation," in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), 51.
- 10 Vincent Crapanzano, "On Dialogue," in *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tullio Maranhão (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 286.
- 11 Skinner, "A Reply to My Critics," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 281.
- 12 Skinner, "A Reply," 281.
- 13 Dominick LaCapra, *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 203.
- 14 Pocock acknowledges this possibility when he says that Burke's critique of the French Revolution can be read either in the context of common law or of political economy. See his "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," in *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays in Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

15 In my own work, I have sometimes employed this approach, for example in my *Modern Masters* volume on *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984), where I sought to situate his work in a force field of constitutive and teleological impulses, including the later impact of deconstruction.

16 Skinner, "A Reply to my Critics," 274.

17 Skinner, "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," in Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context*, 113.

18 Kenneth Minogue raises this issue in his discussion of Skinner's influential work *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*: "We learn in the *Foundations* much about arguments advanced by this writer or that, but hardly anything about the audience. . . . The audience is the great missing character of the *Foundations*, especially in the second volume." "Method in Intellectual History: Skinner's *Foundations*," in Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context*, 189.

19 Martin Jay, "Historicism and the Event," in *Against the Grain: Jewish Intellectuals in Hard Times*, ed. Ezra Mendelsohn, Stefani Hoffman, and Richard I. Cohen (New York: Berghan Books, forthcoming).

20 The first of these is translated as *Event and World* by Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2009) and the second is forthcoming. (Hereafter cited as *EW*.)

21 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 160.

22 For a discussion of the various meanings of "experience," some of which conform to Romano's definition, see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2004).

23 For a helpful account, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).

24 Hannah Arendt, *Willing, The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 110.

25 Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*, 19.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marianne Cowen (Chicago: Gateway, 1955), 230.

27 For my attempt to unravel some of them, see Martin Jay, "The Textual Approach to Intellectual History," in *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

28 F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 280. It should be noted that Derrida himself was somewhat uneasy about the label of a contextualist. In his "Letter to a Japanese Friend" of July, 1983, he wrote: "The word 'deconstruction,' like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a 'context.' For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces and lets itself be determined by such other words as. . . . By definition the list can never be closed." David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988), 4. Unlike traditional contextualization, the chain of displaced signifiers that interested him is horizontal, reversible and infinite.

29 Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 280.

