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Context and Contextualism

The language of contextualism, emphasizing specificity, particularity and contingency, abounds in the language of non-traditional approaches to world politics, from postmodernism to constructivism. Yet rarely are contextualist notions examined critically or systematically for all their implications. This chapter provides an account of contextualist ideas, initially with reference to issues of methodology and normative theory, and identifies certain tensions between historicist and culturalist versions. The discussion raises the problem of identifying exactly what it is that ought to be contextualized in any given exercise, as well as how one context is delineated from others. These issues are illustrated further by reference to communitarianism, multiculturalism and the politics of recognition and/or difference on the one hand, and cosmopolitan responses on the other. The critique of various contextualist ideas set out here by no means implies that considerations of context are unimportant. What is important is how they are used, especially in relation to the culture concept. A further purpose of this chapter is to draw attention to ideology and the way in which meaning, understood as allied to specific cultural contexts, serves relations of domination. I shall argue that far from providing an antidote to domination, certain key aspects of the turn to culture actually reinforce it. The culprit here is a version of contextualism where ‘culture’ is taken as synonymous with ‘context’. This is especially important for how we think about the politics of culture and its implications for some of the other themes of this study.

The idea of contextualism

In one of the few studies devoted specifically to the topic, ‘context’ is defined simply as ‘that which environs the object of our interest and
helps by its relevance to explain it’. The ‘environing’ itself may take various forms: temporal, geographical, cognitive, emotional and so on. There are also various synonyms for context: environment, milieu, setting and background, each of which carries its own connotations and associations. Contextualism is therefore ‘the study of the way in which contexts explain, or is the view that explanation is impossible or seriously incomplete unless context is taken into account’. It follows that the meaning of contextualism is at least partly subsumed under the broader meaning of relativism. The latter is broader by virtue of the fact that the notion of an environment is not necessary to it, because objects, ideas, beliefs and so on can simply be relative to each other independently of any particular environment. Both relativism and the more specific notion of contextualism also differ from scepticism, for whereas the former ideas hold to the existence of relative truths, the latter denies the possibility of any certain knowledge.

Notions of context have been influential in certain areas of study since at least the 1960s, especially philosophy and theology. Gadamer’s study of hermeneutics (including analysis of other important contributors to the field – Hegel, Fichte, Kant, Schleiermacher and Dilthey among others) pinpointed certain issues concerning context and interpretation. Gadamer notes Dilthey’s contribution to reforming the older interpretive principle of understanding the parts of a text – which in earlier periods meant the Bible – in terms of the whole text, and extending ‘the whole’ to the ‘totality of the historical reality to which the individual historical document belonged’. This leads us to grasp the ‘historical context in which the individual objects ... of historical research appear in their true relative meaning is itself a whole, in terms of which every individual thing is to be understood in its full significance, and which in turn is to be fully understood in terms of these individual things’.

Contextualism has also had close associations with anthropology since at least the early twentieth century: ‘Ever since Malinowski, anthropologists have chanted the mantra of “placing social and cultural phenomena in context”, an analytical strategy adopted to throw light on, and indeed make some sort of authentic sense of, ethnographic material.’ Another commentator identifies Franz Boas and his students as most deeply engaged in anthropological contextualism and relativism. More recently, contextualism has been prominent in symbolical modes of anthropology, especially in the interpretive anthropology of Clifford Geertz who drew explicitly on hermeneutic ideas as well as on the