

2

Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas

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Open thinking points beyond itself.

—T. W. Adorno, “Resignation” (1969)

What is meant by the intellectual historian’s claim that an idea can only be studied in context? Generally speaking, it suggests that for any given idea we can only understand the meaning of that idea if we reconstruct the unique sphere of meanings to which it once belonged. Although the claim does not lack its detractors, widespread acceptance of its truth has stood for more than forty years as a kind of ideological consensus among those who would characterize themselves as intellectual historians. In what follows I propose to examine some of the underlying principles that support the idea of contextualism as the highest norm for intellectual-historical practice. Specifically, I will argue that intellectual historians should grant contextualism only a qualified allegiance insofar as it runs into serious difficulties once we accept a broader conception of intellectual history as an exercise in critique.

In a spirit of collegial dissent, I will develop this argument in part as a response to the highly influential 1969 essay by the intellectual historian Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas.” With the benefit of temporal distance we can now see that its singular prestige was partly due to the way it encapsulated a variety of deeper premises concerning the nature of “meaning” itself, premises that would later gain sufficient adherents as to congeal into a kind of orthodoxy across the interpretive social sciences. I will turn to those broader premises momentarily. For the time being, it will suffice to note that the argumentative strength of the essay lay in its readiness to confront a series of confusions that

in Skinner's view bedeviled the practice of intellectual history.¹ The chief complaint was that the history of ideas had ensnared itself in conceptual and methodological difficulties—Skinner called them “mythologies”—that were due most of all to the fact that scholars had paid insufficient notice to the determinative role of context for meaning. Since that time Skinner has not ceased to elaborate and refine a sophisticated defense of contextualism, even if in his later work he has occasionally strayed from his own recommendations. But the original essay can nonetheless stand for the wider consensus. Although many intellectual historians may dispute specific elements of “Cambridge School methodology” (a term that seriously understates the diversity of its representatives), it seems fair to say that the general brief for intellectual history as a contextualist discipline remains a desideratum for the field as a whole. One could also object that Skinner's methodological statement was originally intended only for a specific subfield self-characterized as “the history of political thought.” But it is not clear how a discrete realm of thinking about politics can be intelligibly cordoned off from the rest of intellectual inquiry without losing sight of the wider meanings (metaphysical, religious, epistemological, and so forth) that subtend our thinking about politics. The strong version of contextualism must implicate all modes of thought if it implicates any one of them. It is this strong version of contextualism as a general theory of meaning that I hope to question here.

To forgo misunderstanding, I should explain that I am *not* recommending that intellectual historians abandon the use of contextualism in the restricted sense of method that takes notice of context. Contextualism in this restricted sense is a crucial instrument of historical understanding, insofar as it calls our attention to the resonances and ramifications of ideas in different and diverse settings. I will return to this more restrictive and favorable sense of contextualism toward the end of the essay. My aim here is to suggest that intellectual historians should not endorse contextualism as a global and exhaustive theory of meaning, that is, the view that a specific context can *fully* account for all the potentialities of an idea. This exhaustive view depends upon a number of premises whose status is questionable at best. By exposing these premises I hope to unsettle some of our current disciplinary assumptions about the methods and the purposes of intellectual history today.²

Two Ideals of Intellectual History

I will begin with the preliminary observation that our modern understanding of history overall is characterized by a peculiar tension between two ideals. On the one hand we tend to think of history as an exercise in reconstruction:

because we are prone to think of the past as a foreign country our chief aim is to rebuild for ourselves its language and its customs while keeping in mind that this world was quite different from our own. But on the other hand we think of history as a discipline that is devoted primarily to the study of change: it is not the past as a location that arouses our interest but the past as passage or transformation. Our very understanding of historical inquiry therefore seems to involve two concepts of time: time as a series of moments (punctual time) and time as the extension between them (differential time).

The distinction between these two understandings of temporality served as a major theme for Walter Benjamin in his celebrated 1940 essay, "On the Concept of History," in which he objected to the normalizing and triumphalist consequences of a historiography grounded in punctual time and recommended instead a species of critical-revolutionary historiography grounded in differential time. But even Benjamin may have drawn too stark a distinction between these two concepts.³ In fact, neither the punctual nor differential time can be dispensed with entirely. From the logical point of view, they may actually stand in a relation of mutual implication: without the idea of a series, the passage from one to another would be inconceivable, but without temporal separation any series would collapse into a unity. From this observation we can derive the lesson that historical practice involves a productive combination of two distinctive ideals, which we might call the ideal of containment and the ideal of movement. The first is best typified by the classical Hegelian ambition of arriving at a systematic unity that comprehends its moments within an ultimately stabilized whole. The second is typified by the critique of this unity: it seeks to expose the moments of aporia or fracture that volatilize the present and point always to an as-yet unsatisfied beyond. If the first is associated with the more conservative elements of the mature Hegel, the second is associated perhaps most of all with the critique of Hegelian identity-theory developed by left-Hegelians and especially by the later Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*.

Notwithstanding the powerful clash between them, both the ideal of containment and the ideal of movement do and should play an important role in historical practice, perhaps especially in the practice of intellectual history. In this discipline we serve two masters. We obey the ideal of containment when we situate ideas in contexts, insofar as we subscribe to the principle that a context serves as the larger horizon of meaning within whose bounds an idea can be understood. We obey the ideal of movement because it alone awakens us to a sense of the contingency and impermanence of *any* particular horizon of meaning; it reminds us, instead, to attend to the patterns of endless transformation and reformation by which an idea travels through time.

While both of these principles play an important role in the practical business of historical writing, they must be carefully calibrated so as to not come into unworkable conflict. Full and unqualified allegiance to both ideals at once may be impossible. If we obey the ideal of movement without restraint we may lose any sense for the conditioning forces that help to explain why an idea is not merely invariant, and we are disabled from accounting for local changes of meaning. If we obey the ideal of containment without restraint, we may end up imagining a context as a self-stabilizing unity inside of which there is no history whatsoever. Both ideals are therefore one-sided: the ideal of movement on its own runs the risk of breaking up all contexts and creates the illusion that ideas, like privileged passengers on a high-speed train, simply travel through history while taking only the most superficial notice of their surroundings. The ideal of containment, when it governs without restraint, will break up the historical continuum into a set of discrete totalities, each of which exists in a state of sublime isolation, such that even the passage from one station to the next thereby becomes inexplicable.

Contextualism as Containment

With this distinction in place, we are now better positioned to see that, generally speaking, the discipline of intellectual history over the past forty years has taken a marked turn away from the ideal of movement and toward the ideal of containment. The study of conceptual transformation pioneered by Arthur Lovejoy has given way to exercises in contextualist reconstruction.⁴ There are, to be sure, countervailing tendencies in the profession, and there are a great many works today by the most accomplished intellectual historians that some describe as “neo-Lovejovian” in their method, insofar as they trace a single “unit idea” through various contexts while presuming that the idea exhibits sufficient identity over time as to survive its own variations.⁵ But notwithstanding the occasional gestures of heresy or revolt, the predominant trend for intellectual historians in recent years has been to affirm the dictum that ideas should be studied “in context.”

This is especially true of Quentin Skinner, whose muscular polemic against rival conceptions of intellectual history, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” was first published over forty years ago but continues to inspire. Since that time Skinner himself has not ceased to elaborate and emend his conception of intellectual-historical method in a variety of statements and debates.⁶ It is only right to acknowledge that this corpus of methodological inquiry rivals in its depth and sophistication just about any body of

theory ever addressed to intellectual historians. And while in recent years the Cambridge School has come to resemble Saint Sebastian, there can be little doubt that the practice itself has survived the many arrows that critics have shot its way.⁷ Indeed, the general ideal of containment still passes for many intellectual historians as a normative guidepost for disciplinary practice, and this is so even for intellectual historians who contest one or another of the particular theoretical statements associated with the Cambridge School itself. At issue, however, is not the precise argumentation articulated by any one historian or historical school; in what follows I do not wish to raise doubts about any particular group, and certainly not about the Cambridge School itself (which may be a misleading name, insofar as its most prominent members have rarely subscribed to one and the same method). Moreover, it seems likely that the normative ideal of contextualism will manage to survive both its various contemporary articulations and the particular challenges that have been directed against it. Indeed one of my claims is that such ideals typically *do* survive bounded historical moments, precisely because contexts do not exhaust meanings.

Before launching into the substance of my argument, it is worth pausing to consider the fact that the contextualist idea allies itself with the principle of containment while it suppresses the principle of movement. The very idea of a context, in other words, implies a cessation or (at the very least) a *slowing down* of historical time, and it affirms a stadial logic that divides time into epochs and eras while resisting the dynamism of a temporality that overflows such limits. Most of all the idea of a context reinforces the thought of an “inside” that is proper to a given time and an “outside” that is improper. One of my purposes in this essay will be to explore the further implications of such ideas. But let us move on to a provisional definition: By contextualism I mean the epistemological and normative (and implicitly metaphysical) premise that ideas are properly understood only if they are studied within the context of their initial articulation. This idea has for some time enjoyed a default status that quite often passes without argument or defense, since it is presumed to be merely the common sense of the profession at large. Borrowing from Louis Althusser, one might call it the “spontaneous philosophy of the historians.”⁸

A major characteristic of this spontaneous philosophy is that the historical discipline subscribes to the contextualist premise as defined above as if it were simply the very *meaning* of its own practical activity. Amongst the scholars whose work belongs to the formation of the human sciences, historians are not a group habitually inclined to rarefied debate concerning the philosophical commitments that underwrite their practice. In itself this may not be a fault since the business of philosophy has its own departmental location, and scholarship owes much of its sophistication to a logical (though historically contingent)

division of labor. Many historians would therefore feel disinclined to back themselves up out of their actual activity as historians to reflect upon the meta-presuppositions of doing what they do. In raising this observation I wish neither to fault historians nor to imply that they should all quit the archives to become armchair theorists concerning the nature of their own profession. But it is nonetheless crucial to note that no practice is metaphysically innocent: what passes as common sense is merely an unacknowledged metaphysics (and an epistemology and a normativity) that should in principle be susceptible to philosophical defense. It is therefore worth asking whether the spontaneous philosophy of the historians is defensible and whether it captures with any accuracy what it is that historians actually do in their work. One might initiate this inquiry by isolating certain underlying philosophical premises that seem to inhere in the contextualist ideal itself.

The Premise of Origins

Amongst the deepest premises that animates the practice of contextualism in intellectual history is the assumption that, for every intellectual idea, theme, or ideology, the best account of what that idea, theme, or ideology actually means can only be grasped if one restores that idea to the horizon of its *original* articulation. This premise seems almost inseparable from the historian's disciplinary self-conception as someone who aims to recall meanings that may have been forgotten and meanings that are different from those we may deploy today. Now, at first glance this self-conception may strike most historians as unobjectionable. What should at least arouse our curiosity, however, is the normative attitude that typically accompanies this practice, insofar as the historian appeals to the initial context as not merely *different than* but in fact *authoritative over and against* all later manifestations or deployments of an idea. This normative attitude helps to explain why some intellectual historians are moved to describe later deployments of an idea as somehow *improper*, especially if those later articulations do not conform to the original meaning. The original meaning is presumed to be the one that *conformed to its own surroundings*. Animating this premise, in other words, is a very deep conception of "holistic fit" whereby an idea or argument or ideology is seen to be one part within a larger harmonistic whole. The favorable attitude toward origin thus arises from the belief that in later contexts of articulation this original harmony is disturbed or may be altogether lacking.

It is not difficult to see that this premise may occasionally nourish a normative orientation that regards the historical movement of a concept as a movement

away from proper meaning. This notion of intellectual history (as regression from origins) has found many adherents, perhaps most notoriously Martin Heidegger, who conceived human existence as a condition of thoroughgoing historicity but nonetheless imagined history as a narrative of *Seinsvergessenheit* or ontological oblivion. In Heidegger's philosophy the nostalgia for ideal origins and the declensionist attitude toward later manifestations encouraged a counter-mythology of "authentic" existence according to which the only solution to the predicament of historicity was the resolute claim of proprietary union with the meanings of one's "ownmost" time.⁹ To be sure, not all theories of historical authenticity devolve into an unsavory politics of belonging. Still, the theory of a proper "fit" between an idea and its context may carry powerfully normative consequences. The intellectual historian who suggests that the modern appeal to medieval ideas of real universals (an appeal that surely does not harmonize with the principle of uniformity that underwrites modern science's image of nature) is *ahistorical and therefore illegitimate* can only render this verdict on the assumption that the idea of real universals properly belongs only to the medieval context in which it was first articulated. Animating this verdict, then, is an implicit commitment to the distinction between the proper and the improper, the native and the exotic. To be sure, the premise of origins does not always carry the moralistic message that the exotic suffers the stigma of illegitimacy. But of necessity it entails a commitment to a holistic theory of meaning. But with this observation we may be moving closer to the constellation of premises from which contextualism draws its power.

The Premise of Holism

Perhaps the deepest premise in support of contextualism is the belief that, for every idea, principle, or ideology there is *one and only one native context* in which it is properly understood. The exclusion of multiple contexts follows from the notion that a context is like a domestic space, a holistic sphere of self-contained and enclosed meanings that is (like a Leibnizian monad) "without windows." A context is thus conceived as a condition for the intelligibility of a given idea, or a framework of syntactic possibility that is crucial for the proper understanding of its meaning. Now, if this framework were not closed, this would be another way of saying that the conditions for meaning were not wholly internal but might in fact permit the idea to travel outward beyond its initial context of articulation into other contexts in which its intelligibility would remain intact. The premise of domesticity, however, implies that any such travel must be considered illegitimate or at the very least derivative. On this view, the understanding of an idea in

its belated articulation seems far less important than the historian's prior understanding of its native meaning at the moment of its initial articulation. The intellectual historian who calls for the *proper* contextualization of an idea thus presupposes that a context is like a discrete and holistic sphere that englobes the idea in question and sharply delimits its capacity for movement. Notice, too, that if there were *more than one* proper context for a given idea the very notion of the *proper* would lose much of its appeal. To believe in the restoration of an idea "to its context" therefore seems to imply (as the propriety "its" indicates) that, at least in principle, there was just one and only one particular holistic and self-contained environment in which the idea enjoyed its native meaning.

The premise of domesticity has won traction in part because it appeals to a concatenation of anthropological, linguistic, and structuralist ideas, all of which gained ascendancy over the last half century and contributed to the widespread belief that it makes sense to imagine the world as carved up into self-sustaining cultures or discursive spheres. One important source that has helped to validate the idea of contexts as domestic spaces is the strain of ethnographic holism, inspired in part by the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, that fired the imagination of cultural historians over twenty years ago.¹⁰ The holistic premise was evident, for example, in the notion that a certain event (say, a cockfight in Bali, or a cat massacre in France) might serve as a key by which to unlock an entire system of native meanings. The apparently bizarre or marginal or arcane character of such examples actually helped to reinforce the premise of ethnographic holism, for once one granted the premise of culture as a self-sustaining and quasi-organic unity of logically interconnected parts, it followed (or appeared to follow) that any one component of a culture, even the most unusual, could serve as a synecdoche for the whole. The premise of ethnographic holism may also explain the great attraction of Walter Benjamin's mode of cultural cryptography according to which even the most marginal elements of material culture could be understood as hidden signs for the meaning of the entire age: Benjamin's analysis of the Parisian *passages* is only the most famous example of an interpretative method that became a commonplace in cultural studies over the past half century. This Geertzian-holistic premise was also an important foundation for the so-called new historicism, which carried over from the old historicism the romantic-holist premise that any given culture partakes in a common logic or shared *Zeitgeist*.¹¹

The theoretical underpinnings of this idea are legion. If the premise of ethnographic holism has enjoyed tremendous normative authority among intellectual historians in particular, one explanation may be that it could draw freely upon a great variety of theoretical resources from a range of disciplinary movements. For the Cambridge School (which has exhibited a strong preference for

methodological insights associated with analytic philosophy) the holist premise derived much of its appeal from post-Wittgensteinian theories of language, according to which the understanding of a term requires an understanding of that term's deployment within a language game and the "form of life" in which that game can be played.¹² This strike against logical-positivism and its atomistic theory of knowledge was to play an important role in validating the holist theory of meaning, especially as it acquired a more accessible and pragmatist character in the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin.¹³

But the holist theory of meaning could draw upon other theoretical resources as well. It gained adherents in linguistics and anthropology thanks especially to the Sapir-Whorf thesis concerning the transcendental function of language in the construction of reality: Differences of languages were supposed to imply differences of worlds.¹⁴ Meaning-holism came in many styles, and it was one of the very few points shared in common across all of the diverse movements of social theory that Skinner summarized in his 1985 collection on "the return of grand theory in the human sciences."¹⁵ It occupied a central place not only in the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, but also in Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm-governed worlds of normal science; it also informed various modes of French structuralism as realized in anthropology by Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Marxism by Louis Althusser, and in the earlier conceptual history of Michel Foucault, especially the archaeological excavations of the historical *a priori* he undertook in his 1966 masterpiece, *Les mots et les choses*.¹⁶

The very strength and diversity of these theoretical movements over the last half century may help explain why the holist theory of meaning would have struck so many intellectual historians as an unobjectionable instrument in their methodological arsenal. Partly thanks to this premise intellectual historians were inclined to accept the contextualist notion that the world of human meaning consists in a plurality of holistic spheres, that is, that meaning is conditional upon distinctive and perhaps even incommensurable discursive frames. From all of these various resources intellectual historians could derive the seemingly self-evident truth that a context is a self-contained system or horizon that must be understood *from within* if any of its constituent ideational contents are to be understood at all.

The Premise of Provincialism

One of the more controversial assumptions that has served to underwrite the contextualist model of intellectual history is the notion that a context cannot embrace a very *large* terrain but must instead be sharply delimited in both time

and space. The assumption is that such a *localism* is just what it means for something to count as a context: A context, in other words, has to be temporally bounded, because authors can only be said to be in actual conversation with other authors of their own historical moment. This may help to explain why the contextualist imperative tends to fasten the intellectual historian's attention on a context defined by a limited span of years, that is, a sufficiently short framework such that one can plausibly assign a political, generational, or chronological index to an intellectual sphere, defined as, say, "the ancien régime," "the era of the Scientific Revolution," or "the fin-de-siècle." A context has to be geographically bounded for similar reasons (although in the era of transnational history this stricture has considerably relaxed). From the point of view of the practicing historian the emphasis on a local or narrowly defined context may seem to play a truly indispensable role, insofar as it focuses one's research within a specified range and holds in abeyance the welter of facts that might otherwise command one's attention. But as a theory of meaning it is far from uncontroversial.

In "Meaning and Understanding" Skinner sought to defend the narrow conception of context by appealing to the role of intention. Briefly, the thought is that we cannot reconstruct the context of a given idea without understanding what the author of that idea could possibly have meant. Once we have focused our interpretative efforts on an author's *intentions* it may seem we are naturally confined to a quite limited range of semantic possibilities. This emphasis on intention has drawn considerable fire, especially from critics who object on theoretical grounds (especially from psychoanalysis and poststructuralism) that the notion of unitary intention or propriety meaning derives from a mythical notion of a humanist subject who enjoys sovereign control over his own self-expressive utterances and acts. It may be that (as critics such as Jacques Derrida urged us to acknowledge) textual meaning will always exceed the bounds of authorial intention.¹⁷ Challenges to the humanist model have also come from feminist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, who have discerned in the privileging of a linear and logo-centric meaning a certain species of "phallogocentrism." Whatever their specific allegiance, all of these complaints partake of the similar insight, that texts are not univocal or grounded in discrete acts of intentionality.¹⁸

Without minimizing these complaints, however, it is worth considering the proposal that communication itself may depend on a quasi-transcendental commitment to mutual understanding.¹⁹ Even if this were the case, however, there would still be no reason to believe that such a commitment to understanding could be *fully* discharged within the confines of a distinctive chronological or geographical or institutional context. In fact, the ideal of communication

may encourage us to exceed any given contextual limits insofar as intentions themselves are not always provincial in scope. After all, when individual philosophers or political theorists articulate their ideas, it is quite often their intention to speak *beyond* their own time and to communicate with a broader audience stretching from the present into the sometimes remote future. Indeed, even intellectual historians who embrace the methodological priority of authorial intent must remain open to the possibility that the textual meanings developed by a particular writer were perhaps *not meant* to be limited to only one place and time. Spinoza, for example, surely did not intend for *The Ethics* to lay out its arguments concerning the one extended substance of the cosmos as arguments only for the inhabitants of seventeenth-century Amsterdam or Western Europe. The appeal to authorial intent might therefore encourage us to imagine a context that reaches across a very wide temporality, and one might even think that the proper horizon as defined by authorial intent would have to be one that considered the meaning of an idea *sub specie aeternitatus*. After all, the finitude of a thinker is a poor measure for the reach of her intentions: if the intellectual historian hopes to sustain her commitment to the empathic reconstruction of past intentions, it is unclear why this responsibility should reach its terminus at the threshold of the dead.

A similar and perhaps rather more intuitive argument might be made regarding the provincial assumption that a context must be sharply limited by space. When Hobbes laid out his theory concerning the State of Nature and the construction of Leviathan, it seems relatively uncontroversial that he intended that theory as a description of the human political condition as such, rather than, say, a description limited in its meaning and validity only to mid-seventeenth-century England. But a certain methodological provincialism seems to inhibit the intellectual historian from endorsing the thought that the context for understanding a given idea may be far more expansive (say, the entire era of early modernity, or the entire era of bourgeois proto-liberalism, or, perhaps, the entire temporal span of European modernity penetrating even our own contemporary age). Intellectual historians often promote a preferred context by announcing the bold truism that no ideas occur “in a vacuum.” But if human meaning itself qualifies as a context (albeit one unlimited in scope), there would appear to be no principled or a priori reason why claims to broader validity across greater stretches of time or geography must always invite skepticism, and why they must yield before the ostensibly more “historical” premise that ideas possess their true status only within narrowly bounded fields of meaning.

There is a further reason why the methodological appeal to intention should prompt us to reconsider the premise of provincialism. Two guiding principles for contextualism are that we should, first, “delineate the whole

range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on the given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance,” and, second, “trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.”²⁰ Such principles may appear to imply a relaxed and capacious understanding of a context as a field of possibilities that are built up pragmatically if we attend only to what the author *might have meant*: What “could have been” said functions as the sole boundary for interpretation. One difficulty with this principle, however, is that it is still too parsimonious in its conception of possibility. For it is a common strategy of textual interpretation that we try to determine not just *what* an author said but what she *might have said* if pressed to consider a further implication or even a contradiction in her claims. A full reconstruction of *possible* intentions should therefore proceed according to the imaginative scenario where the author would have been responsive to criticism to such a degree that they might even have shifted to views entirely other than the ones they held. Such responsiveness, after all, belongs to the very idea of argument itself. But this interest in conceptual possibility should therefore prompt us to reconsider whether *any determinate field* could ever be fully adequate to the possibilities of a given text. In fact, this more expansive search for possible meaning would seem to reflect with greater accuracy our actual habits of reading and argumentation, insofar as our typical approach to texts is to regard them as *open* rather than *closed* in their range of semantic possibility. This approach is not merely a matter of methodology; it also corresponds to what we should not be embarrassed to call the *wonder* of intellectual inquiry. After all, it is the paradigmatic experience of critical reading that one is confronted by meanings one did not expect to find, and it should be a desideratum for any methodology that it reflect this experience of intellectual astonishment.

Intellectual history is by definition not merely a description of perceptible objects but an inquiry into meaning. From this basic premise intellectual historians have recognized their own hermeneutic implication in the meanings they study, and they have developed sophisticated theories so as to explain the way that any access to past meaning must of necessity involve the historian in an act of interpretation rather than objectivistic description.²¹ But this interpretative relation to the past can be easily obscured, and it is especially hard to remind ourselves of our hermeneutic entanglement with the past if we conceive of a context as a singular sphere that pre-exists the act of interpretation. This is because the holistic definition of a context encourages us to believe that a context is an objective thing that can be identified in a purely descriptive and noninterpretive fashion. But is such a belief at all plausible? The ideal of factual reconstruction relies upon the objectivistic ideal of a disengaged observer: the

historian, according to this model, is supposed to remain purely external to the world she aims to know. We can call this the *premise of descriptivism*. This premise gains its plausibility only if one accepts the notion that a context is a single objective field that requires empirical reconstruction. But once one abandons the notion of a *single* context, one is confronted with various questions of interpretation and perspective that immediately implicate the historian in the field of meanings she wishes to examine. Doubt regarding the uniqueness of a past context, in other words, should also lead us to doubt the objectivistic methods by which contexts are described.

The Premise of Exhaustion

When gathered together into full-scale doctrine, the various premises sketched here support the view that, for any given idea, there is *one and only one* historical context that both enables and exhausts its meaning. This conclusion—the premise of exhaustion—follows more or less automatically from the quasi-transcendental assumption that a context is a unique and narrowly bounded condition for meaning. But it is a conclusion with some rather startling consequences: Once the historian grants the premise of exhaustion she is forbidden from imagining the possibility of semantic continuities across broad stretches of time, and, more dramatic still, she must be especially skeptical of the possibility that ideas from the past might still be available for *critical appropriation in the present*. An idea that is displaced from the unique context of its initial articulation can no longer be considered the same idea at all: it suffers the stigma of illegitimacy. The premise of exhaustion therefore confronts us with the final and most perplexing consequence of the many premises listed above; namely, it encourages the view that intellectual history should confine itself to the reconstruction of discontinuous contexts, and it discourages the historian from believing in the possibility of long-enduring intellectual traditions.

Most intellectual historians, I suspect, will recognize that the premise of exhaustion continues to hold sway in the spontaneous morality of our discipline. If the cardinal sin of the historical profession is presentism, then the premise of exhaustion is a methodological talisman against it. But there is another, quite different feature of exhaustive contextualism that can make it seem an attractive doctrine for intellectual historians: it can operate as a proxy for direct criticism. Rather than directly grappling with a past idea, the intellectual historian can simply consign it to its context. Historicizing the idea *into the past* thereby serves to *defeat* the idea and marks it as no longer legitimate. This historicizing gesture is a frequent recourse for intellectual historians who wish to

condemn past ideas (usually ideas they dislike on political grounds) but who as historians remain uncomfortable with the possibility of engaging in presentist criticism. But the consequences of this genealogical gesture—we might call it “defeatist historicism”—are highly ambivalent.²² To consign an idea to irrelevancy by revealing its unflattering origins or historicizing it into another time appeals covertly to the logic of historical triumphalism according to which the present enjoys presumptive superiority over the past.²³ The gesture is also suspiciously anti-intellectual, since it refuses to address past arguments *as* arguments and it evades the burden of critical engagement by retreating into the apparently disengaged stance of contextualist reconstruction.

More troubling still, the premise of exhaustion obstructs our access to past ideas whose potentialities may yet remain unredeemed. The premise of exhaustion is especially tempting for historians who aim to expose the unpleasant political consequences of certain high-minded ideals. It is of course a commonplace that political agents often fail the ideals they profess. But ideas from the past may yet retain their potentialities even as we also acknowledge their ideological contamination. Past ideas, in other words, may bear an aspirational significance that remains still unrealized, despite the fact that this significance was betrayed by those who deployed them. This was an insight Habermas wished to proffer in his study of the bourgeois ideology of “public sphere,” an idea whose utopian promise retained its validity even as that promise was broken by the fact of its restricted application.²⁴ To conclude that such ideational aspirations lack all legitimacy is to deny ourselves possible resources of instruction that flow from the past into the present.

This stricture against recognizing the persistence of the past in the present is among the more puzzling consequences of exhaustive contextualism. Skinner’s essay gave credence to the notion that intellectual historians should forgo the appeal to anticipations because if we were to permit ourselves such a “mythology of doctrines” we would reify ideas as eternal standards by which to measure their predecessors. Historians who are susceptible to such an error might imagine, for example, that a certain idea “anticipates” a later and more mature articulation, or that another idea does “not yet” or “not quite” embody what it will eventually become. When characterized in this fashion such habits of interpretation can be easily made to look teleological and therefore foolish. But the stricture against them has the unfortunate effect of inhibiting our appreciation for how ideas transform and ramify over the *longue durée*.

In his recent book on human rights Samuel Moyn chastises scholars for their readiness to treat earlier phenomena as anticipations, and he compares them to church historians who saw Judaism as anticipating Christianity.²⁵ The comparison is noteworthy. Although one might fault Christian supersessionists

for their failure to recognize Judaism's integrity and independence, it is not clear why a historian would therefore be wrong for investigating the Jewish roots of Christianity. The ban on anticipations is supposed to relieve us from the error of mistaking earlier views for genuine precedents. But (*pace* Skinner) history in fact is rich with anticipations that are taken up interpretatively in ways that are often difficult to contain. If the intellectual historian insists that an idea make its debut *only* when it bears all the recognizable marks we ascribe to it in a specific temporal moment, he is then saddled with the strangely ahistorical view that a context and its attendant ideas must be born all at once or "in one fell swoop." In this circumstance a great many of the most unlikely and intriguing antecedents that belong to the deeper past will simply drop out of sight. Moyn's skepticism toward more speculative narratives concerning the origins of human rights is from a certain point of view admirable, as it is intended precisely as a *critical* and self-described "genealogical" rejoinder to triumphalist histories of human rights. But it is also symptomatic of the way historians deploy the contextualist imperative to cordon off broad sectors of the historical past. Ironically, historicist contextualism isolates not only the past but also the present; and it thereby fortifies a liberal ideology of thoroughgoing self-authorization. The paradoxical consequence of unqualified contextualism, then, is to assert the deeply ahistorical view of each age as an island unto itself. Ultimately, it may be the present that suffers the greatest impoverishment. Toward the end of his 1969 essay Skinner offered the bracing counsel that "we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves."²⁶ To this recommendation we might instead counsel humility and remembrance of the dead: No epoch exists in sublime isolation from its temporal antecedents, and no era should imagine itself as so detached from the past as to flatter itself with the fantasy of intellectual independence.

Intellectual History as a Critical Practice

From the forgoing remarks it should be apparent that I harbor certain reservations about the merits of wholesale contextualism as the highest purpose of intellectual history. Nothing I have said, however, militates against taking contextualism seriously as one among the many gestures to which intellectual historians might have recourse in their labors. Contextualism is not only important, but it is also a vital and even indispensable instrument in the arsenal of historical understanding. When deployed in a modest fashion, it serves to enable understanding and it fortifies the hermeneutic bridge between the present-day historian and her past. Criticism therefore presupposes understanding.

The difficulty arises when the contextualist imperative is deployed in such a way as to disable or to block criticism entirely. Exhaustive contextualism in this sense often serves as a means not of enabling but of *closing down* our critical engagement with the thoughts of the past. If we understand a context as a narrowly delimited sphere of meaning that has long ago exhausted its relevance, we will be discouraged from believing that an idea can enjoy the unbounded freedom of movement across time and space, and we will not permit ourselves to imagine that past ideas have any critical significance for the present world.²⁷ Once we commit ourselves to the abstemious notion that the context of the past remains separable from the context of the present, we will think of historical inquiry as a disengaged practice, an assumption that will only fortify our sense that the past is a foreign country.

At the beginning of this essay I observed that historical understanding typically involves an allegiance to two distinctive ideals, containment and movement. I noted further one must strive for a certain balance between them. The anatomy of contextualism as presented above was intended to emphasize the risks that attend a one-sided allegiance to the principle of containment alone. For the intellectual historian, these risks may be especially acute. This is because the practice of intellectual history is only possible if one takes up an empathic and communicative rather than merely external and objectivistic relation to the intellectual activity of the past: ideas can only be understood if one believes it is possible to gain hermeneutic access to past meanings. Without such access understanding would be impossible: the past would fall silent, the dead rendered mute. The very practice of historical empathy, in other words, should suffice to show intellectual historians that full-blown contextualism cannot be embraced without serious qualification.²⁸

Much of the prestige of contextualism arises from a logical fallacy of collapsing validity into genesis. It is of course an incorrigible fact of human discursivity that due to the very finitude of human existence all meanings necessarily find their articulation *within* sociohistorical contexts. This is not only a truism but also a truth that can only be annulled with an appeal to a Platonism of meaning. But from this truth it does not follow that meanings are thereby exhausted within any given context of articulation. The point was made quite well by Jürgen Habermas when he characterized “today’s historicism” as “an empiricism” that “denies seriousness to the validity claim of universalist character that stands behind every affirmation and negation of the subject who takes a position.” While any such validity claim is “always held ‘here and now,’ in a local context,” its very character *qua* validity claim necessarily “overflows all merely provincial criteria.”²⁹ If this hermeneutic recovery of past ideas is feasible at all, then our capacity for grasping the potential

validity claims of the past *at all* should disallow us from picturing a context as a closed province of meaning. The bridge of empathy does not stop at the threshold of the dead: it demonstrates a movement in human understanding that shatters the boundaries of any possible context and reveals the mobility of ideas against all efforts of containment.

From its beginnings in the early nineteenth century the modern historical profession has always been burdened with a double paternity. On the one hand it ascribes to the identitarian logic of the mature Hegel, which saw in time a principle seeking its own eventual completion. On the other hand it disrupts the ideology of historical closure and sees in time a movement beyond the self-satisfactions of the present.³⁰ One need only recall the concluding statement of Hegel's *Logic*, where Spirit fulfills its grand tour of its own externalization only to return to itself with the higher knowledge of its mediation as "the self-comprehending pure Notion."³¹ To be sure, the logic of narcissism that came to be associated with Hegel's philosophy by the time of his death may not adequately capture what was most dynamic in his thinking: The youthful philosopher discovered in the dialectic an instrument of critique and an occasion for "tarrying with the negative." Indeed, it is this image of Hegel as a restless partisan of ongoing argumentation that has recently enjoyed a revival amongst neo-Hegelians such as Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard. But the philosopher of negativity ultimately disfigured his own critical impulses to become an affirmative apologist for the merely existent. "The true is the whole" became a gesture of ideological self-satisfaction that gave to the present the metaphysical prestige of completion. The paradox of Hegelian closure is that it misrepresents the eclipse of the mind as its satisfaction, as if an idea reaches a point of stasis beyond which nothing further can be expected.

It is this complacency of the Hegelian dialectic that in the mid-1940s moved Adorno and Horkheimer to condemn identity-theory as a betrayal of the critical intellect:

The actual is validated, knowledge confines itself to repeating it, thought makes itself mere tautology. The more completely the machinery of thought subjugates existence, the more blindly it is satisfied with reproducing it. Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape. For mythology had reflected in its forms the essence of the existing order—cyclical motion, fate, domination of the world as truth—and had renounced hope. In the terseness of the mythical image, as in the clarity of the scientific formula, *the eternity of the actual is confirmed and mere existence is pronounced as the meaning it obstructs*.³²

Taking some interpretative liberties with the above passage, we might say that what Adorno and Horkheimer most feared was the Hegelian ambition to situate thought within a unique and ultimate context. In their view this contextualist ambition would ironically spell the end of thought itself: it would denature the mind's critical energies by bringing it into a quasi-mythic harmony with its surroundings, where all meaning would be identified with "the eternity of the actual."

For this reason the left-Hegelian opponents of identity-theory were eventually moved to adopt a critical posture that disallowed the possibility of contextual reconciliation altogether. For the later Adorno in particular, self-identity was always ideological and as such stood condemned as the enemy of reflection: "The picture of a temporal or extra temporal original state of happy identity between subject and object is romantic," he observed. It was "a wishful projection at times, but today no more than a lie."³³ The critical prospect of an idea that would be more than mere ideology thus presupposed the possibility of an idea's movement beyond any possible context.³⁴ This prospect prompted Adorno to observe in 1969, "As long as thinking is not interrupted, it has a firm grasp on possibility. Its insatiable quality, the resistance against petty satiety, rejects the foolish wisdom of resignation. The utopian impulse in thinking is all the stronger, the less it objectifies itself as utopia—a further form of regression—whereby it sabotages its own realization. Open thinking points beyond itself."³⁵

The passage quoted above from Adorno dates from the same year as Skinner's manifesto for historicist contextualism. If Adorno's critique has any merit, it is that it might serve to chasten the intellectual historian who subscribes to contextualism as the highest principle of understanding. The risk of exhaustive contextualism, in sum, is that it reinforces the ideological notion that it is possible for an idea to come into complete stasis with its surroundings. The quietism of this notion may enjoy a continued allure for intellectual historians who feel untroubled by the thought that their task should be limited merely to the harmonistic containment of ideas. A sociology of knowledge that redescribes thought as mere "strategy" and reduces critical insight to the workings of "habitus" or "persona" commits a similar error of harmonistic reduction of thought to society, even if it believes such redescription serves the interest of a critical unmasking.³⁶ Genuine criticism, however, must in principle exceed any given limit and cannot permit contextualism to have the last word. This principle is instructive not only for the intellectual historian: Any mode of thinking that does not wish to lapse into thoughtlessness must forbid itself to imagine the past as a closed world that the living would find intolerable.

Criticism without Transcendence

One may be tempted to read the forgoing argument against exhaustive contextualism as a merely reactive plea for the “autonomy” or “transcendence” of ideas. It is entirely correct, as Samuel Moyn suggests, that the argument pursued here endorses the view that there is something about the intellect that resists its wholesale reduction to a given social order. But Moyn is too quick to suppose that the only way for intellectual historians to embrace social theory would be “to anchor” representations in practices. The very notion of an anchor is suggestive insofar as it suggests the desire to bring movement to a stop, the fixing of meaning in something external to itself. If one were to assume that a reduction of this sort is what the reckoning with social theory must entail, then a final reconciliation between intellectual history and social theory would seem unlikely. But such a conclusion rests on a mistake, since, as Adorno’s example reminds us, “social theory” can acknowledge the social significance of the intellect itself. It is possible to theorize the relation between intellect and the social whole without collapsing one into the other. Social theorists and intellectual historians alike should be able to agree that the relation between mind and world is one of eternal contestation rather than full reconciliation. Nowhere in this essay have I promoted the view that theoretical activity wholly transcends its discursive (or nondiscursive) context. It is an unfortunate but unsurprising gesture of contextualist holism that it mischaracterizes the critical moment in thinking as a bid for metaphysical transcendence. Nor is this gesture uncommon: Holist theories of meaning have always gained their prestige by characterizing their opponents as partisans of an atavistic metaphysics. This was already true of the contextualist theory that went by the name of Marxism (even if that theory surrendered the critical gesture by which Marxism survived its own context).

To present the possible options of intellectual history as a stark choice between social immanence and intellectual transcendence misses the dialectical entanglement by which immanence and transcendence cannot confront one another merely in a stance of abstract negation: Those who wish to explore the contextual embeddedness of ideas will contribute to this dialectic, but only if they resist the illusory notion of the social as a noncritical and exhaustive totality in which ideas gain an ostensibly final and harmonistic explanation. The methodological stricture against such an illusion arises from the very phenomenology of thinking. If we listen to Socrates (in the *Theaetetus* 155 d) that wonder or “*thaumazein*” is the beginning of wisdom, then our own capacity for astonishment in the face of ideas both past and present may remind us that no single context can ever be adequate to an idea’s critical potentialities. To believe in

such a final context (that is, an ultimate plenitude for any and all possible meaning) is not a requirement of historical method; it is a species of theology. At the same time, theological motifs may also serve as gestures of critical resistance against the forces of containment, insofar as the act of criticism preserves within itself a memory-trace of the transcendence once ascribed to God. For it is the paradoxical truth inherent in the very meaning of critical reflection that situated thinking exceeds its own situation.

Conclusion

In his celebrated theses “On the Concept of History” Walter Benjamin paid homage to this idea of redemption when he sought to articulate a critical alternative to the style of contextualist historical interpretation he associated with historicism. Ironically, Benjamin felt a properly critical historiography could only resist the logic of historicism if it brought the movement of history to a *standstill*: “Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well.” In light of the reflections presented here, Benjamin’s conclusion may appear paradoxical, for it would be easy to construe the “arrest” of history as an plea for containment rather than movement. But this would be to misunderstand the real object of his criticism. What is most objectionable in historicism according to Benjamin is its harmonistic ambition to solidify the historical continuum into a closed totality, and its refusal to countenance the critical potentials that point *beyond* any given context. The critical historian, he claims, will resist all such gestures of domestication. Such a historian “blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework,” and ultimately this will “blast open the continuum of history.”³⁷

These remarks, of course, do not entail an outright rejection of contextualism as such. Contextualism need not imply the *exhaustion* of an idea. On the contrary, when deployed in a more limited way, the recovery of a context that has been neglected or misunderstood may very well facilitate a critical engagement with a given idea and may even help us toward an *enhancement* of that idea’s possibilities. My remarks are directed only against the exhaustive or transcendental species of contextualist holism that too often passes for the spontaneous philosophy of historical practice. It is this spontaneous philosophy that we should reject, not contextualism as such. We should, accordingly, take note of the gap between grand statements of method and actual practice. For the irony is that, whenever they venture into a more critical style of analysis, intellectual historians typically violate the principles of exhaustive contextualism to which they claim allegiance.³⁸

My reflections may also suggest a reconsideration of the way intellectual historians envision their relationship to neighboring disciplines. Over the past half century, the contextualist imperative has done a great service to intellectual history by deepening its capacities for methodological self-consciousness, but it has also had the unfortunate effect of erecting a barrier against philosophy and political theory (alongside other modes of criticism). The implicit proposal of this essay is that this barrier be dismantled and that we reimagine intellectual history less as a distinctive discipline and more as the eclectic practice that Warren Breckman in this volume calls a “rendezvous discipline,” that is, a trading zone *among* the disciplines that could serve as a space for the flourishing of historically informed criticism.³⁹ This more creative if less definitive understanding of intellectual history might permit us to relax some of the strictures that have gained authority in the field thanks to an overzealous ethic of disciplinary professionalism and technical rationality. And it would embolden us to defend the practice of open thinking in a social order that seems ever more determined to bring it to an end.

Notes

1. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” originally published in *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3–53. For a later version of the essay and the most important methodological elaborations, see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

2. For helpful remarks on an earlier draft of this paper, my special thanks to Martin Jay, Warren Breckman, Judith Surkis, Duncan Kelly, and all of the participants in the Radcliffe Workshop. My gratitude also to Samuel Moyn and Darrin McMahon. This paper was completed before the publication of an essay by Martin Jay that develops some similar claims; see Martin Jay, “Historical Explanation and the Event: Reflections on the Limits of Contextualization,” in *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 557–71.

3. Thus Benjamin erroneously celebrated the mythological conception of the historical past as a “monad,” an idea that I criticize here. See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in his *Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–411.

4. For the original model, see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936).

5. See, for example, Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006).

6. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. I, *Regarding Method*.
7. See, for example, James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), and Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
8. I have borrowed and modified this phrase from Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (London: Verso, 1990), and from John Guillory's brilliant essay on the "Sokal Affair," which he examines against the theoretical background of the metaphysical posture of anti-realism, a posture he calls "the spontaneous philosophy of the critics." John Guillory, "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002): 470–508.
9. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ed. and trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
10. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," in his *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412–54; Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
11. Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant development of this historicist-holist premise introduced, however, a subtle note of dissent from this holism insofar as it demonstrated how a culture (say, Elizabethan England) permits a "swerve" or variation in logic across different domains: Greenblatt's holism, in other words, was a holism of theme *and* variations. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations (The German Text, with a Revised English Translation, 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition)*, ed. G. E. Anscombe and Elizabeth Anscombe (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991). See esp. §241: "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (75).
13. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).
14. See Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), especially the 1939 essay, "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language," 134–59.
15. Quentin Skinner, ed., *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
16. Although Gadamer is widely seen as an important resource for proponents of contextualism, it is instructive to note his warning that "a horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further." Quoted from Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum/Seabury, 1975), 238. For a general discussion of the holist theory of meaning in the tradition of analytic philosophy, see John H. Zammito, *A Nice Derangement of Epistemes: Post-positivism in the Study of Science from Quine to Latour* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). On Foucault's idea of a historical a priori, see Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archaeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

17. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–28.
18. See especially the criticism of univocal meaning by Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," in *History and Theory* 19, no. 3 (October 1980): 245–76.
19. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1985).
20. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 49.
21. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.
22. See Peter E. Gordon, "Continental Divide: Heidegger and Cassirer at Davos, 1929—An Allegory of Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 1, no. 2 (August 2004): 219–48.
23. The *locus classicus* for this argument is Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which tries to revive the impulses in dialectical materialism that resist historicist containing: criticism, as Benjamin defines it, involves *breaking up* the historical continuum.
24. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
25. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 6.
26. Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding," 52.
27. For further remarks on the ethic of "open reading," see my review of Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*, March 12, 2010, available at <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24316/?id=19228> (accessed July 13, 2013).
28. On historical empathy, see, for example, Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
29. Jürgen Habermas, "Israel and Athens, or to Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?," *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*, ed. and trans. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 293–301; quote from 297–98.
30. On the critique of Hegel and the origins of modern history, see John Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. p. 16.
31. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 844.
32. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 20, my emphasis.
33. Theodor W. Adorno, "Subject and Object," in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, 499.
34. As Walter Benjamin observed, "In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." Benjamin, "On the Concept of History."

35. Theodor W. Adorno, "Resignation," rpt. in *Telos* 35 (Spring 1975), as quoted in Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), my emphasis, quoted at 264.
36. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
37. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.
38. See, for example, Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
39. See Warren Breckman, "Intellectual History and the Interdisciplinary Ideal," in this volume.