

## Context as Environment: A "Workmanlike" Approach

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The text of *Theses on Theory and History* is a potential turning point in the field, and for that I am grateful to its authors. While there are potential pitfalls in the text, there is no question that in their criticisms of the intellectual culture of modern professional historical practice, the authors are on to something. In naming anti-intellectualism as pervasive and as nothing less than a threat to the profession, the text opens up space for us to challenge the reigning orthodoxy of chasing an audience in the form of some idea of the public we seem largely to have imagined for ourselves. That is not to challenge or dismiss the importance of ideas of the public, of public institutions, or of the goal of being a public intellectual, but rather to insist that if we let ourselves be governed by a fear of being seen as 'inaccessible,' etc., we are walking into a trap that we might not ever get out of. In a discipline that is too often enamored of what the *Theses* bitingly refer to as "impotent story-telling," any insistence on time and space for some critical introspection is a welcome one.

Historians love to contextualize everything but themselves. If context and contextualization are the most fundamental keywords for historical practice, Section III of the *Theses* (On Theory and Critical History) can be read as an important attempt at bringing our collective investment in an often-murky concept to light. There is a tension, I want to suggest, between the vision of theoretically informed historical practice as "worldly," which begins Section III's reflection on context, and the critique of the "workmanlike" approach ascribed to dominant modes of practice in the profession. The rote contextualization or historicization rightly critiqued today seems to me to be less "workmanlike" than bureaucratic (the duck-hunt model of critical scholarship: your task in the game as a licensed historicizer is to find something insufficiently historicized, get out your context gun, and shoot it). But from the standpoint of disciplinary politics, setting up an antithesis between theory and work is a misguided argumentative move, and more importantly, it threatens to elide a materialist account of historical knowledge production where the activity of theorizing might be imagined as a particular kind of worldly work, of work of and on and in the world. To embrace a worldly *and* "workmanlike" approach in this sense would be to highlight 'context' as the term for dynamic fields of possibility and limit—not simply as a given, nor simply as a choice.

What a materialist imagining of intellectual work might allow us to do is ease perceived dichotomies between postmodern or anti-foundationalist methodologies and conventionally materialist or determinative ones. This is not to form some illusive and undesired disciplinary consensus, but to follow Walter Benjamin in experimenting with modes of practice that help us get our hands on the histories we find ourselves working on and in. The *Theses* emphasize the underdetermined, contingent and genealogical aspects of context: "every reference to context (as an index of meaning) is itself an argument about social relations and arrangements that cannot be presumed... context is never solely given or self-evident" (III.5). Sure, one might say, but can we imagine contexts that are somewhat given, for all intents and purposes indisputable, or present regardless of the studious contestations of critical humanists? We might think of environmental history and/or maritime history as instructive here: climate change or the world ocean are

accumulated forces of gargantuan proportions, but if we think of them as contexts in a conventional sense we can only get so far with their indeterminacy as such, and we risk robbing them of their power, or better yet, of robbing ourselves of our capacity to perceive that power. The world desperately needs new ways of imagining an equitable and sustainable use of its materials; its contexts, histories, or environments. There is a sense, I think, in which we will have never been "after nature," and there are points where the work of humanistic study runs into real limits and—at precisely those points—opportunities.

Acknowledging those points seems to me to have been a very big part of what a writer like Herman Melville was up to in his own work, where the boundaries between the work of war and death and labor and the work of studying and reflecting—theorizing—are blurred, seen in a new light as worldly, as mutually, contextually implicated in the world. There is an idea here of study as a kind of worldly work: work of, on, in, and for the world; and there is an idea here of context as environment, as worked on and remade but hardly ever in conditions entirely of our own making or choosing. Context, then, is both the world and our relation to it, and that relation, which is life itself, can take an astounding plurality of forms. To think historically today is to protect and expand that plurality, from historical methods to biodiversity. *Moby-Dick* gradually broadens a narrative that begins with one person's studies of their contexts into a global and environmental history. But note, shipmates, that this is not a presaging of the recent fashion to elaborate the end of critique and the supposedly deadening work of contextualization. It is a profound deepening of what we might mean by context in the first place. One option we have when confronted by the twin towers of a kind of perpetual micro-contextualization on the one hand and the dismissal of context and critique on the other is to say "Context? Context?! You don't even know the half of it! We barely have the equipment to see that far and go that deep. We're *working* on it, and we'll let you know what we find!" That might be thought of as another way of saying context isn't everything, but man, it's right up there.