

Introduction

This special issue, "Reflections on Contemporary Historiography," brings together articles by four renowned scholars in historiography and by one in comparative literature and translation to raise and consider issues and problems concerning "Context (Contextualization) and (Historical) Understanding." The articles are based on talks given at an interdisciplinary conference on "Contextualizing and Understanding" hosted by National Taiwan University's Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences in October 2009.

Put simply, the assumptions, concepts and categories of 20th century historiography with its strict national/regional focuses have been eroded by a variety of rising trends, notably, globalization and localization. For example, the customary "national" trends of historical inquiry are being strongly challenged by the need to consider larger, even global, contexts, while the master narratives of ruling powers and majority communities are being questioned, sometimes subverted, by the subplots and subtexts of heretofore neglected "others" present in the mix — all of which undeniably add nuance, texture and truth-value to "the histories." However, such alterations of "context" complicate the very notion of historical "understanding". The positing of larger, say, global contexts inevitably raises the question of whether the idea of a global perspective is even viable; for any person, group or even any society, can never be more than a part of the whole itself, that is, a partial viewpoint. (By the same token, is the trending notion of "cosmopolitan" coherent?) How can we speak of "historical understanding" in global context when the idea of a global perspective itself is so shaky? At the same time, the insistent, smaller subplot/subtext contexts, which involve differing milieus of language, culture, values, lifestyle, etc., also put the viability of "historical

understanding" at risk. Similar problems of context and understanding arise with respect to understanding events remote in space and/or time, as well as to cross-cultural understanding.

The five articles on "Context and (Historical) Understanding" are arranged, roughly, from "the conceptual" to "the pragmatic" in approach. Hayden White identifies problems involved in achieving "understanding" of events remote in time: even if we were to suppose that knowing the context was the key to understanding the event, "knowing the context" itself would be no less challenging, for the context's historical, social, cultural, linguistic matrices would be different than ours and not be fully available, particularly given that everything, including every relationship among things and phenomena, is in flux. A way round such problems would be to reconstruct the context of the chosen "event" in terms of a theory of the modalities of relationships among things — with the understanding that the modalities too are changing in and with their contexts. On this account, historical understanding has a fluid quality, for it involves not the recognition of the essences or substances of things but rather of the modalities of their positive relationships — all of which are in flux. Jörn Rüsen offers a constructive approach to the problems and issues of context and (historical) understanding by introducing the bridging idea of historicized humanity, which could provide the basis for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. He recommends a sort of global inquiry into each culture's articulations of its (historicized) idea of the human being, or humanity, then highlighting its general features. The result would be a spectrum of the all of the cultures' human conceptions of humanity, including the historical development of each, as much as possible. The working out of this spectrum of all the various cultures' human articulations of human beings, of humanity, would already provide a sort of inclusive matrix or meta-context in which historical and cross-cultural discussions could effectively take place so that significant cross-cultural "historicized humanistic" understanding could be realized.

Zhang Longxi does not see contextualization as essentially problematic, for he considers that every sort of human exchange, dialogue, discourse, inquiry, etc., is inherently contextual. Moreover, he thinks the problems involved with context and understanding have been exaggerated due to an excess of theory, as well as to misleading contrasts based on faulty generalizations between various languages and cultures, most notably between those of China and of the West. With several examples, he shows that the generalizations are not so firm or well-founded and that, pragmatically, when people want to understand and communicate with each other, by taking up the right tools, efforts and attitudes, they generally can succeed. Regarding contemporary cross-cultural intellectual discourse, he advocates making explicit "the relevant contextual determinants" as a way forward to think "outside the box" of the presumptive theories, thus sidestepping many of the quandaries of context and understanding. Richard Vann tackles the issues and problems in light of a working notion of the ownership of history. That is, besides the conceptual and linguistic issues concerning context and understanding, there are the problems concerning how and by whom, in each time and locale, the materials, the data, of historical significance are held, managed, focused, filtered, censored, transmitted, etc. Before we speak of context and understanding globally and cross-regionally, we might consider the scope and fairness of the history as conducted and told in each place and time. For example, during the past century, American history has become American histories of the experiences and stories of more and more of her constituent peoples, cultures, etc. Also, several American master narratives have been questioned and refined. Similar trends are noticeable elsewhere, even in China. At the same time, challenges constantly arise to the received dicta of history, notably from newly excavated data and alternative viewpoints. In this regard, data and praxis often catalyze history more than do general issues and problems.

Finally, Ewa Domanska makes the case that the key to breaking through the problems and issues of context and (historical) understanding would be directly to develop new methodologies of historical research and narrative. For her, the question is not simply one of how to apply theory; rather, we should give priority to the basic empirical data of history; that is to say, we should delve deeply into the data concerning, say, an event under study, and go on to generate theory as tailored and relevant to that event. The problem thus becomes one of "how to *generate* fresh theory," for historical theory and practice can be meaningfully brought together only by the creation of "grounded theory" that is attuned to and closely reflective of the data. Domanska recommends the specific methodological approaches of "comparative study" and "case study" in order to avoid forcing preconceived historical categories onto the data — and letting the categories emerge from the data. A general procedure follows: first, the case (event) is selected, described and thoroughly analyzed; second, the results are compared with those for several similar cases; and, third, the results of the comparison are generalized into a theory that generates fresh concepts. The case study would provide horizontal density while the comparative study would provide vertical perspective. The horizontal density assures that the theory and concepts are well-grounded; the vertical perspective assures that the study does not reduce into mere particularity. Domanska concludes with the following watch word: the key to generating significant results in historical inquiry is to not just ask about the "what" and the "how", but, insistently, to ask about the "why", which will lead to a sharper focus, not to mention a guiding rationale and more significant results.

By serendipity, this issue also contains "On the Art of Translation," by master literary translator Göran Malmqvist. Many of his observations on the problems, tools and approaches to translating literary texts sensitively across time and culture resonate with the historians' reflections on context and (historical) understanding. Malmqvist's refreshingly insightful and practical

approach offers another perspective on the dilemmas of cross-temporal and cross-cultural understanding.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Kirill Ole Thompson". The script is cursive and elegant, with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Kirill Ole Thompson*
Special Issue Editor

* Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University.