A Cozy Little World: Reflections on Context in Austrian Intellectual History

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While contextualization is basic to all historical analysis, modern Austrian intellectual history exhibits a particular preference for strong contextual accounts of cultural development. Since the 1970s, the literature on fin-de-siècle Vienna as a birthplace of modernism—associated with scholars such as Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, William Johnston, William McGrath, and above all Carl Schorske—has endorsed the view, famously expressed by the poet Friedrich Hebbel, that Austria was the "little world where the big world holds its tryouts."[1] Vienna's cultural efflorescence, it is argued, was exemplary not only for its magnitude and innovation, but also for the close affiliations of its participants.[2] "No one who has studied the high culture of Vienna in the period of liberal ascendancy," Carl Schorske remarked programmatically, "can fail to be impressed by the sturdy integration of its components."[3]

In his justly renowned *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, Schorske argued that works by Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, Arthur Schnitzler, Adolf Loos, and others were best understood in relation to a common Viennese cultural and political context. In Schorske's hands, the capital of the vast multinational empire became an intellectual hothouse whose political scandals and ethnic conflicts piqued the energies of a flourishing urban literati and whose cafés and theaters disseminated local ideas. The metropolitan milieu provided Schorske with a framework for decoding culture, an approach that led to the tidy and attractive link between politics and ideas. Vienna's striking fin-de-siècle modernism was fueled by a generational flight from political fragmentation and liberal decline into the fecund world of the arts and intellect. "*Flectere si nequeo superos*," as Schorske famously encapsulated it, citing Freud citing Virgil, "*Acheronta movebo*."[4] In this essay, I will argue

[1]Cited in Michael Steinberg, *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival* (Ithaca, 1990), 120. In a more apocalyptic vein, Karl Kraus quipped in *Die Fackel* that Austria-Hungary was the "experimental station for end of the world." Cited in Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven, 1986), 10.

[2]Edward Timms offers a suggestive visual image of this integration in the form of a diagram of a handful of Viennese intellectual circles whose memberships overlapped. Timms, *Karl Kraus*, 9.

[3]Carl Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, 1998), 125.

[4]Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York, 1981). Schorske has extended his analyses to a wider comparative history of other turn-of-the-century cities. See Thomas Bender and Carl Schorske, eds., *Budapest and New York: Studies in Metropolitan Transformation: 1870–1930* (New York, 1994). Other authors

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that the strong contextualist approach, despite its powerful appeal, contributes to distortions in our understanding of Austrian fin-de-siècle thought and culture. Drawing on Edmund Husserl's early theory of objects, I propose an alternate model of the relation between cultural texts and historical context that remains truer to the complexities of the documentary material analyzed by intellectual historians.

Schorske's tour de force offered such a potent account of Viennese modernism that it defined a new model for Austrian cultural studies and for intellectual history as a whole.[5] The influence of the book was twofold. First, it advanced a powerful hypothesis linking Vienna's remarkable cultural flowering to the decline of social and political liberalism. Although this thesis still retains force, many scholars have challenged and revised it.[6] Second, and perhaps more fundamental, the book established a historiographical standard for Austrian studies by linking politics and culture in a strong contextualist account whose ultimate *explicandum* was not this or that thinker, but urban and imperial culture as a whole.[7] In other words, despite his demurrals, Schorske offered a characterization of Viennese high culture *tout court*. This standard, with its goal of providing a coherent and integrated account of an urban cultural milieu, has proven quite durable. The puissant image of a Viennese cultural elite driven toward modernist experimentation by political and social anxiety has become more of a "paradigm" for Austrian history than a "thesis" about the development of ideas (to

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have followed Schorske's paradigmatic lead by contributing cultural histories of Prague and Budapest. See, for example, John Lukacs, *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and its Culture* (New York, 1988); Mark Anderson, ed., *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics, and the Fin De Siècle* (New York, 1989); Péter Hanák, *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest* (Princeton, 1998).

[5]Schorske's book has also become the monument for a particular method of linking politics and culture in intellectual history and, as such, stands as a historiographical classic. For an overview of Schorske's influence on Austrian history and a review of the fin-de-siècle Vienna literature, see Steven Beller, ed., *Rethinking Vienna 1900* (New York, 2001), especially the introduction by Beller and the essays that bookend the volume: Allan Janik, "Vienna 1900 Revisited: Paradigms and Problems," and Mary Gluck, "Afterthoughts about Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: The Problem of Aesthetic Culture in Central Europe." This volume grew out of a 1995 conference entitled "Beyond Vienna 1900: Rethinking Culture in Central Europe." For an account from a decade earlier that warns against "aestheticized" and "commodified" images of an overly coherent Viennese culture, see Michael Steinberg, "'Fin-de-siécle Vienna' Ten Years Later: 'Viel Traum, Wenig Wirklichkeit'," *Austrian History Yearbook* 22 (1991): 151–62. Steinberg defends Schorske against complaints that he overpackaged Viennese culture. On Schorske's wider influence beyond the borders of Austrian history, see the essays collected in Michael S. Roth, ed., *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche* (Stanford, 1994), a volume compiled in Schorske's honor.

[6]These challenges have taken a variety of forms. Historians such as John Boyer and Pieter Judson have questioned Schorske's characterization of liberalism. Steven Beller, Robert Wistrich, and Ivar Oxaal have pointed out his marginalization of Jewish contributions to, even the overall Jewish character of, Vienna's cultural innovation. Still others, such as Michael Pollack, Jacques Le Rider, David Luft, and Michael Gubser, have disputed the Schorske's protomodernist and ahistorical characterization of Viennese culture. John W. Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna* (Chicago, 1981); Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914* (Ann Arbor, 1996); Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1989); Ivar Oxaal, Michael Pollak, and Gerhard Botz, eds., *Jews, Antisemitism, and Culture in Vienna* (London, 1987); Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (Oxford, 1989); Michael Pollak, *Vienne 1900: Une identité blessée* (Paris, 1984); Jacques Le Rider, *Modernité viennoise et crises de l'identité* (Paris, 1990); David Luft, *Eros and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil, Doderer* (Chicago, 2003); Michael Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in fin-de-siécle Vienna* (Detroit, 2006).

[7]Here, and in other histories of Austrian cultural and intellectual life, there is a tendency to blur several contexts—imperial, national, and urban—by interchanging the terms "Austria" (especially Cisleithanian Austria) and "Vienna." This move contributes to the untidiness of the paradigm. In a recent essay, David Luft makes a similar argument about the damaging effects for intellectual history of the geographic and linguistic ambiguity of the term "Austria." See Luft, "Austrian Intellectual History and Bohemia," *Austrian History Yearbook* 38 (2007): 108–21.

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use Allan Janik's distinction), so satisfying to both scholars and a wider public that it serves as a kind of master key for unlocking the meaning of the myriad products of turn-of-the-century Austrian culture.[8] Historians began to see Schorske wherever they looked, embracing his contextualist assumptions even if they disputed the specifics of his argument.

Schorske's example reinforced a long-standing tendency among historians of Vienna to seek the distinctively Austrian qualities in the cultural phenomena they studied.[9] The field of Austrian history is rich with attempts to define the uniqueness of the Austrian mind, identify the features of Austrian philosophy, or explain a particular artistic figure as exhibiting wider Austrian concerns.[10] Commentators have variously advanced empiricism, psychologism, aestheticism, theatricality, musicality, logical positivism, critical modernism, and anti-historicism as distinctly Austrian schools. These characterizations tend to contrast an Austrian cultural *Sonderweg* to the German behemoth in the north, where Kantianism, Hegelianism, and historicism bespoke a cultural triumphalism that poorly accommodated the decline of Habsburg power and prestige. The pervasiveness of these attempts to distinguish Austrian culture within the broader German sphere makes it hard for historians to escape the contextualist injunctions of their subfield or avoid the compulsion to seek an Austrian idiograph in the work of individual Cisleithanian thinkers. A scholar may try to redefine the characteristics of Viennese uniqueness or restructure the relation between politics and ideas, but to ignore either of these themes would neglect the historiographical pedigree of the field.

Of course, Dominick La Capra and others have long pointed out that context is a vexed and problematic theoretical construct.[11] Generally understood, the concept describes two fundamental aspects of historical situation: (1) clear boundaries in time and space and (2) a set of defining characteristics that shape events within those boundaries. To contextualize an event is to situate it within a delimited temporal and geographic region that is saturated by a broadly shared set of distinctive qualities. These demarcations are not always hard and fast. Historians admit that contextualization is an inexact and even messy process because social and cultural phenomena often escape their local constraints or react against dominant trends. Freud and Wittgenstein, for example, both reflect local Viennese preoccupations and

[8]The argument that historians of Austrian high culture have muddied the distinction between thesis and paradigm comes from Allan Janik, "Vienna 1900 Revisited: Paradigms and Problems." Janik's summary is helpful in reminding us that the effect of Schorske's work diverged from the author's stated intent. Janik also acknowledged that his own classic, *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, co-written with Stephen Toulmin, advanced a paradigmatic thesis about a Viennese high culture focused on the troubled relation between language and ethics, a culture of "critical modernism." Hence, although *Wittgenstein's Vienna* acknowledged the influence of non-Austrian thinkers, it still strove for an integrated characterization of metropolitan culture. Wittgenstein came to stand for qualities that exemplified *Viennese* thought and culture.

[9]This quest for Austrian-ness, it should be noted, extends well back into the nineteenth century, but Schorske helped to renew the concern for cultural distinctiveness by offering a model of cultural coherence built around the unique features of Austria's capital. His account has contributed to the nostalgic revival of interest in Francis Joseph's Vienna.

[10]See, for example, William Johnston, *The Austrian Mind* (Berkeley, 1972); Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York, 1973); David Luft, *Robert Musil and the Crisis of European Culture 1880–1942* (Berkeley, 1980); J. C. Nyíri, *Austrian Philosophy: Studies and Texts* (Munich, 1981); Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (Chicago, 1994).

[11]Dominick La Capra, "Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the 'Culture' Concept," *History and Theory* 23, no. 3 (October 1984): 296–311; "Reading Exemplars: Wittgenstein's Vienna and Wittgenstein's Tractatus," in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, 1983), 84–117. Against Schorske's critics, Michael Roth ("Performing History: Modern Contextualism in Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 [1994]: 729–45) notes the performativity of his mentor's account.

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transcend them. Even if most historians would not go so far as La Capra in challenging the notion of context as such, they acknowledge that cultural characteristics must be understood as widespread, not universal; shifting, not fixed; tendencies, not absolutes. Despite this imprecision, however, the goal of achieving a definitive understanding of the Austrian context and demonstrating how it infused Viennese cultural production remains something of a regulative ideal. Though comprehensive contextualization is beyond scholarly reach, the conviction that an integrated fin-de-siècle milieu somehow contained and configured mental production still purports to be an accurate reflection of Austrian reality. Historians of Austria, in other words, begin their studies of cultural phenomena by stamping them as "Austrian," thereby embracing the social and cultural qualities that the name has come to imply.

Schorske's contextualism has also faced *empirical* challenges. Steven Beller, Pieter Judson, Fritz Fellner, and other scholars have demonstrated that Vienna was more of a cultural and political crossroads than a cozy little world.[12] The essays collected in the 2001 volume *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, for example, exhibit a wide array of critiques advanced against Schorske's model, and Beller's editorial introduction (along with Janik's reprinted state-of-the-field survey) charts the history of that criticism, which began soon after *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* appeared. Beller shows not only that this or that aspect of Schorske's model has come under fire, but also that the methodological isolation of Vienna as an integrated and enclosed cultural field might itself skew our understanding.[13] In such a cosmopolitan and fast-growing city, the *echt* Viennese was less often a multigenerational urbanite than a person of varied ethnic and provincial attachments—perhaps born in Vienna, perhaps not; perhaps of Austro-German parents, perhaps not; certainly jostling with Bosnians, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, and others in the streets of the *Erste Bezirk* and beyond. Provincialism, in other words, was the norm, and to be cosmopolitan often implied myriad provincial commitments. This pluralism was reflected in an unprecedented intellectual diversity as well: Leibnizian empiricism, Hegelian idealism, German historicism, Herbartian psychologism, and English liberalism (to name a few prominent schools of thought that had "non-Austrian" roots) all clamored for attention among the city's cultural and academic elite. In this regard, Austrian culture demonstrated not so much a harmonized integration as it did heterogeneous and often fractious competition for cultural and intellectual allegiance, cleavages that seemed to echo the agonistic urban and imperial politics of the time. One of the dangers of a strong contextualist approach is its tendency to reify and homogenize cultural characteristics, thereby discouraging scholars from crossing well-defined temporal and spatial borders.

[12]Beller's work on the prevalence of Jews in Vienna's cultural efflorescence and Pieter Judson's work on liberalism in the Habsburg Empire offer a much less homogeneous image of Austrian culture than that suggested in the Schorskean paradigm. Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews*; Pieter Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries*. In "Geschichte als Wissenschaft. Der Beitrag Österreichs zu Theorie, Methodik und Themen der Geschichte der Neuzeit," Fritz Fellner has shown that the Austrian historical profession benefited from thinkers and ideas from outside the monarchy. See Fellner, *Geschichtsschreibung und nationale Identität: Probleme und Leistungen der österreichischen Geschichtswissenschaft* (Vienna, 2002), 36–91. Social historians have also demonstrated the porous nature of Vienna's city limits and cultural allegiances. See, for example, Hubert Ch. Ehalt, Gernot Heiß, and Hannes Stekl, eds., *Glücklich Ist, Wer Vergißt: Das andere Wien um 1900* (Vienna, 1986).

[13]Beller, ed., *Rethinking Vienna 1900*. In his 2001 *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited*, Janik credited the city's polyglot character with stimulating cultural innovation. He noted that scholars have only begun to investigate the elaborate links between Vienna and the rest of the empire, not to mention the importance of foreign immigration and international connections on the development of ideas. See Janik, *Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited* (New Brunswick, 2001), 5–6.

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Here it is worthwhile noting that Schorske himself may not have been a methodological ally of latter-day Schorskeans. In the introduction to *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, the doyen of Austrian studies insisted that historians must "abjure … the positing in advance of an abstract categorical common denominator—what Hegel called the *Zeitgeist*, and Mill 'the characteristic of the age.'"[14] Yet the common paradigms of Austrian intellectual history often do just that by taking Schorske's assumptions and conclusions, rather than his practice, as a starting point. Schorske sought to avoid this danger through an approach that he called "post-holing," studying the ideas and disciplines of his varied cultural subjects by using critical methods appropriate to them, rather than adopting a singular interpretive framework. Throughout his seminal volume, Schorske treated works and texts as windows onto the cultural and political circumstances that informed their creation. It is the text of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* that offers clues to its relevant political context; the Ringstraße architecture that visually indicates the eclectic Liberal drive for historical pedigree; the poems of Hofmannstahl, the novels of Schnitzler, and the paintings of Klimt that exhibit the generational struggle against midcentury ideals. In challenging Schorske's paradigmatic influence on Austrian intellectual and cultural history, therefore, critics might look to his methodological stress on source priority.[15]

In the conclusion of my recent book, *Time's Visible Surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, I argued that the strong contextualist approach to intellectual history entailed misleading assumptions. I suggested instead another notion of context that may be more illuminating, one that treats historical milieu not as a framework that contains and determines cultural events, but as a complex temporal and cultural situation emerging out of the source works that intellectual historians study—contained in, rather than containing, texts and artifacts.[16] My reading of several Austrian and Austrian-influenced thinkers prompted me to consider this alternative. Alois Riegl, for example, pioneered an art-historical method based on close attention to and minute description of visual detail, an approach that descried historical change *within* the formal details and stylistic impulses of artworks rather than superimposing a prior historical framework to explain an image's significance.[17] Riegl's professor Franz Brentano, whose notion of object intentionality laid the groundwork for phenomenology, offered complex ruminations on the intricacies of part-whole relations defined internally, not in terms of a preexisting external context—a branch of logic that his student Stanislaw Lesniewski called mereology (from the Greek μερος, or "part.")[18] And Riegl's luminary follower Walter Benjamin attempted in his Arcades Project to locate philosophy in the "ruffle of a dress,"[19] hence suggesting a novel understanding of the relationship among the thinker, his historical context, and his objects of study.

[14]Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, xxii.

[15]I thank Samuel Moyn for pointing out this irony to me.

[16]Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 216–17.

[17]Riegl's classic works include *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (1893), *Spätrömische Kunstindustrie* (1901), and *Das holländische Gruppenporträt* (1902). On Riegl, see Margaret Olin, *Forms of Representation in Alois Riegl's Theory of Art* (University Park, PA, 1992).

[18]On Brentano, see Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (Chicago, 1994). For a related discussion of aesthetic formalism in Austria, see Lambert Wiesing, *Die Sichtbarkeit des Bildes: Geschichte und Perspektiven der formalen Ästhetik* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1997).

[19]Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 463. See also Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

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In this essay, I will flesh out this methodological argument by considering it in light of the ideas of another Brentano student, Edmund Husserl, whose early theory of objects offered two insights that can be usefully applied. First, Husserl emphasized the inherently incomplete nature of our knowledge of objects. Second, he stressed the involvement of the subjective imagination in the perception of objects. Applied to Austrian studies, these insights challenge the tendency to presuppose a fixed and objectified Viennese context that serves to explain the meaning of cultural products.

The list of twentieth-century thinkers influenced by Husserlian phenomenology is too long to canvass here. Husserl's turn toward "the things themselves" inspired dominant trends in Continental thought, informed modernist literature, and spawned new methods of research in social psychology.[20] Adding Franz Brentano to his rightful place as an intellectual forebear increases the scope of phenomenology's influence to analytic philosophy, cognitive psychology, art history, economics, and other fields.[21] Perhaps even the modern historical discipline, with its recent fascination for material culture, might trace part of its complex genealogy back through Benjamin to Riegl, Husserl, and Brentano. The degree to which phenomenology served as a common source for these schools of thought would of course require longer treatment than I can offer here. Nonetheless, the scope of Husserl's historical influence warrants consideration of his ideas for their historiographical pertinence as well.[22]

Objects took myriad forms in Husserl's phenomenology.[23] As opposed to Kant's empty transcendental formalism, Husserl's philosophy offered a domain of inquiry full of widely varied phenomena. "An object of knowledge," he wrote, "may as readily be what is real as what is ideal, a thing or an event or a species of a mathematical relation, a case of being or of what ought to be."[24] His famous *epoché*, the bracketing of the assumed reality of our perceptions, differed from Cartesian doubt in that it retained objects of experience within the phenomenological realm rather than rejecting them as untrustworthy. In doing so, Husserl's transcendental reduction, which he worked out gradually in the years following the *Logical Investigations* but whose outlines were evident in his early work, opened up for examination a realm of purely experiential objects. Elisabeth Ströker insists that Husserl defined the term "object" as nothing more than a bearer of predicates, a conceptual cipher that took on many individual forms and characteristics in actual experience.[25] This basic definition allowed objects within the phenomenological realm to retain the same immense diversity they

[20]Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida are only a few of the philosophers inspired by Husserlian phenomenology. Donald Wallace, in a paper delivered at the 2007 American Historical Association Conference in Atlanta, pointed out Husserl's impact on Hermann Broch. The French poet Francis Ponge also admired phenomenology. For Husserl's impact on research and assessment methodologies, see James A Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, "Interpretative Practice and Social Action," in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005), 483–505.

[21]My book, *Time's Visible Surface*, points out Brentano's influence on Alois Riegl. Barry Smith's *Austrian Philosophy* discusses Brentano's impact on analytic philosophy and on the economist Carl Menger.

[22]On Husserl's significance for historical hermeneutics, see David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, 1978).

[23]For helpful introductions to Husserl's thought, see Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (The Hague, 1976); James M. Edie, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology: A Critical Commentary* (Bloomington, 1987); Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology* (West Lafayette, IN, 1994); Paul Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of his Phenomenology* (Evanston, 1967); Elisabeth Ströker, *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. Lee Hardy (Stanford, 1993).

[24]Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (New York, 1970), 225.

[25]Ströker, 21–22n.

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presented to the uninterrogated senses. The main difference between sensory and phenomenological objects was that the external reality of the latter was not presumed.

The two volumes of *Logical Investigations*, written early in Husserl's career to provide a phenomenological foundation for empirical science, presented a logical system that referred predicative acts to their experiential objects. Husserl enlisted Brentano's notion of the intentionality of all consciousness in order to merge the logically predicating subject with perceived things.[26] "Each intentional experience," he insisted, "is either an objectifying act or has its basis in such an act."[27] Here we must highlight the peculiar *act*-character of Husserl's objects. Perceived things, according to his formula, were *constituted* in experience, "objectified" in operations that engaged subjective activity and sensory data. Rather than preexisting or standing outside experience as stable entities, objects emerged in perceptual acts.

To exemplify the intimate connection between act and object, Husserl offered a reflection on his own experience: "I speak … of my inkpot," he wrote, "and my inkpot also stands before me: I see it. The name names the object of my percept, and is enabled to name it by the significant act which expresses its character and its form in the form of the name."[28] In this passage, the inkpot emerges in two distinct types of experience: as an appearance "stand[ing] before me" and as the target of a naming. These two modes of relating to an object differed in their temporal implications. The inkpot, Husserl wrote, "confronts us in perception," in a "sequence of experiences of the class of sensations, sensuously unified in a peculiar serial pattern.… This act-character is responsible for the fact that an object, i.e. this inkpot, is perceptually apparent to us."[29]

Although perception ushered forth the inkpot in a continuous series of acts, the name imposed a static meaning-sense on this temporal experience. "[T]he words," he noted, "[did] not belong to the objective context of physical thinghood." Naming attached an illusory permanence to objects that emerged in the serial experience of perception, marking things as distinct and singular entities across time and space, repeatedly identified as the same. Husserlian objects, therefore, were temporal composites, perceptual "unities-of-validity"[30] that provided a stable foundation for experience, as well as for logical and empirical science. Phenomenologically, however, they were not externally fixed entities passively received by the senses; instead, they were constituted through and in perceptual acts.[31] And because experience was never exhaustible, our awareness of objects was always open to revision. "How little of the object which appears," Husserl remarked, "is as such to be found in the experience of its appearing."[32]

Husserl offered two reasons to explain why our knowledge of objects was inherently contingent. First, one could never examine an object from all possible angles and

[26]In *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, Brentano famously argued that "[e]very mental phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction, or toward an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way." (*Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, trans. Antos Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister [London, 1973], 88).

[27]Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 648.

[28]Ibid., 688.

[29]Ibid., 688.

[30]Ibid., 667.

[31]On this point, Husserl clarified an ambiguity in Brentano's concept of intentionality regarding the relation between a consciousness and its mentally in-existent object.

[32]Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 538.

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perspectives; it was always possible for a new viewpoint to alter our previous understanding. Although an object could be determined with enormous likelihood, the infinite horizon of possible viewpoints prevented one from ever achieving absolute certainty of its parameters.[33] Objects were always open to revision. A second reason for the inconclusiveness of our knowledge arose from subjective contributions to the perceptual act. Subjects were not simply passive recipients of object impressions; they influenced the constitution of objects by viewing them from particular standpoints and shaping them into perceived unities.

This subjective contribution became clear in Husserl's reliance on the imagination.[34] As part of what he called the eidetic reduction, imagination was used to vary a perceptual object mentally in order to identify the core *invariants* or essences that came to define particular things.[35] Because these objects were partly shaped by the perceiving and imagining subject, they could not be determined with universal certainty. It should be stressed, however, that for Husserl this epistemological inconclusiveness did not undermine the foundations of empirical science or indicate the impossibility of meaning as it might have for Derrida.[36] Despite the inherent corrigibility of our perceptions, experiential objects exhibited a stable persistence that could not simply be argued away. The lack of complete certainty in our knowledge of objects did not undermine the scientific *adequacy* of perceptual evidence.[37]

In the first volume of *Ideas*, published in 1913, Husserl once again introduced a familiar item for the reader to ponder. "In front of me," he wrote:

> in a dim light, lies this white paper. I see it, touch it. This perceptual seeing and touching of the paper as the full concrete experience of the paper that lies here as given in truth precisely with these qualities, precisely with this relative lack of clearness, with this imperfect definition, appearing to me from this particular angle—is a cogitation, a conscious experience. The paper itself with its objective qualities, its extension in space, its objective position with regard to that spatial thing I call my body, is . . . cogitatum, . . . something perceived.[38]

Here again Husserl treated the relation between perception and objects as a problem at the heart of phenomenological inquiry. Although he seemed to accept the materiality of the paper as part of its "real" existence, his concern focused on concrete material extension as a hypothesis *perceived* in experience rather than as a naively assumed datum.

As in *Logical Investigations*, two characteristics defined experiential objects found in the phenomenological domain: incompleteness and stability. Because perceptions of inkpots and paper were partial, incomplete, and open to new perspectives, no unequivocal certainty could characterize our knowledge of them. Though they were always revisable, however, objects *persisted* in a way that secured our experience and perception. This steadfastness, constant if

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[33]Ibid., 712–15. Ströker, *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology*, 56–58.

[34]This subject-object admixture resembles the art-historical theory of illusionism outlined by the Austrian art historian Franz Wickhoff in *Roman Art*. Methodological and theoretical resemblances in the work of Wickhoff, Alois Riegl, and their colleagues led me to describe them as protophenomenological in *Time's Visible Surface*.

[35]The term "eidetic" comes from the Greek word *eidos*, meaning "form" or "idea." Although Husserl's term recalls Platonic forms, he did not claim that eidetic images existed in any real or external sense. Instead, they designated the pure experience of perceived objects, prior to the mitigating preconceptions that shape our worldly experience.

[36]Husserl's influence on Derrida is well known. See Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln, NE, 1978). For a discussion, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

[37]For a longer discussion of Husserl's theory of objects, see Ströker, *Husserl's Transcendental Phenomenology*, Section B, 45–114.

[38]Husserl, *Ideas*, 116–17.

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not absolute, provided weight and conviction to object experiences, as well as an empirical credential for phenomenology, which otherwise eschewed the conventional certitudes of natural science. Without assuming the reality of a world of objects surrounding and determining perception, Husserl tried to build outward from relatively stable object perceptions toward a new understanding of the context that informed them. He interrogated the perceptual realm in order to provide a more rigorous understanding of objects and their worldly situation.

Husserl's object theory offers useful insights for Austrian intellectual history—and not simply because its author emerged from Viennese academic circles.[39] His analysis of the inherent revisability of perceived objects can help us rethink our understanding of the Austrian historical context, which we treat, after all, as something of an object or container that confers meaning on our individual topics of study. The fin-de-siècle set piece offers such compelling reference that scholars are tempted to presuppose its trenchancy as a historical framework, allowing it to mute the specificities and nuances of their individual topics. By simply adopting Schorske's forceful contextualization, however, we make easier assumptions about Austrian culture than we should.

Husserl's theory suggests that historians need not posit an a priori set of borders and characteristics that predetermine the artifacts they "contain."[40] The basic contours of the Viennese context may be harder to objectify than we suppose because of the plethora of significant viewpoints a historian can take and the unavoidable implication of subjectivity in all interpretive endeavors. Because the appropriate context for shedding light on one historical problem might be entirely misleading for another, the clues to fuller historical insight lie in more careful examination of our primary sources rather than the wider application of an "external" and "objective" contextual frame. Vienna was, after all, crowded with novel ideas. Its intellectual boundaries shifted; its cultural depths produced great varieties of ethnicity, experience, political allegiance, and intellectual commitment. Challenging the analytic priority of context over text, as some scholars have begun to do, can return Austrian intellectual historians to the unique and diverse character of their material. By weakening the prevailing contextualism and highlighting the revisability of every interpretive effort, Husserl's methodological claims may prompt Austrian historians to seek a more direct—if always open-ended—confrontation with their sources.

But where does this proposal lead us? Foucauldian genealogies; Derridean deconstruction; La Caprian worklike analyses?[41] What commends these approaches, regardless of their controversial theories of language, is the emphatic and rigorous employment of one of the most *traditional* gestures of the historical discipline: textual analysis—deep and meticulous critical scrutiny of original works as the primary site for the explication of ideas. Nonetheless, I suspect that invoking poststructuralism and endorsing its stress on textuality and heterogeneity for Austrian studies may seem somewhat facile. For even if it is historically accurate to insist that Vienna was a fragmented and riven city that can never be comprehensively surveyed, the "de-construction" of context seems to deny the very meaning-making prospects of history as such.

[39]Born in Moravia, Husserl studied in Vienna between 1881 and 1886, where he fell under the sway of Brentano. His subsequent teaching career took him to Halle, Göttingen, and Freiburg.

[40]In this regard, Husserl's later investigation of the life-world that provides the horizon of meaning for all objects is also methodologically germane. See *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, 1970). Hans-Georg Gadamer provides a trenchant discussion of this concept in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, 1976).

[41]All of these philosophies, it should be noted, are linked genealogically to Husserlian phenomenology.

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How do we speak about the past if we are precluded from fixing the boundaries and characteristics of a period with any degree of confidence? Is this not a case of letting exceptions overrule commonalities, of giving in to the easy temptations of obscurity rather than undertaking the labor required for clarity?

My argument, I should stress, is not intended to deny the historiographical relevance of context as such. Just as Husserl would have balked at Derrida's extrapolation of his ideas, I do not propose an extreme poststructuralist skepticism about the possibility of contextualization or dismiss the insights achieved by Schorskean narratives of Austrian culture. As Husserl noted, denying objective certainty leaves plenty of room for empirical adequacy. Similarly, I do not reject the notion of an "Austrian" or "Viennese" identity as altogether useless. Clearly, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers were very concerned with what it meant to be Austrian. To cite only one example, the Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung, founded in the 1850s to write transnational histories of the Habsburg Empire, encouraged historians such as Albert Jäger, Heinrich Friedjung, Alphons Lhotsky, and Heinrich von Srbik to seek out the features of Austrian history that distinguished it from its European neighbors.[42] The quest for Austrian-ness is an important historical topic in itself, as Michael Steinberg has demonstrated in his work on the Salzburg Festival, and one need not accept that there was such a thing as a distinct Austrian-ness in order to investigate efforts to define it.[43]

But there are dangers in supposing that a stable Viennese context impressed all its thinkers and cultural products with a fixed set of resemblances. Among other things, the convention of an integral and rounded Austrian high culture rests on a selective consideration of cultural features and literary figures. There were many members of the cultural elite who disregarded the quest for Austrian distinctiveness: Husserl, who studied in Vienna but spent his teaching career in Germany, betrayed little concern for imperial identity. His mentor Brentano, a German philosopher who figures prominently in narratives of Austrian thought, had a decidedly antagonistic relationship with Habsburg Catholic authorities. Aside from his late essays on monuments, Riegl displayed few of the overt cultural preoccupations that motivated Karl Kraus, Robert Musil, Hugo von Hoffmanstahl, and others.[44] And Freud and Wittgenstein, although certainly alert to trends in their home city, embraced influences and ambitions far wider than the parochially Austrian.[45] Explaining the ideas of such figures by insisting on the primacy of their Viennese culture leads to partial and simplified conclusions.

Take the examples of Brentano and Husserl: What context is appropriate to understand their work? Situating their ideas against any of the well-recognized Austrian or Viennese fin-de-siècle

[42]Alexander von Helfert's pamphlet "Über Nationalgeschichte und den gegenwärtigen Stand ihrer Pflege" (Prague, 1853) helped to define the mandate for this institute. On the Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung, see Alphons Lhotksy, *Geschichte des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung 1854–1954* (Graz, 1954); Fellner, *Geschichtsschreibung und nationale Identität*; and Gubser, *Time's Visible Surface*, 77–88. In "Austrian Intellectual History and Bohemia" (110), Luft points out that there were also nineteenth-century writers who questioned the concept of "Austria."

[43]Michael Steinberg, *The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival: Austria as Theater and Ideology, 1890–1938* (Ithaca, 1990).

[44]See Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus*; David Luft, *Robert Musil and the Crisis of European Culture*; Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hoffmannstahl and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860–1920*, trans. Michael Steinberg (Chicago, 1984).

[45]For an argument, contra Schorske, that Freud should not be understood through a primarily Austrian (or primarily Jewish) lens, see Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews, and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (New York, 1978).

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backdrops provides a false sense of comprehension. One could, of course, render Brentanian and Husserlian thought according to the Schorskean paradigm of politics and culture. Their quests for order took the form of a search for a stable ground for scientific empiricism (descriptive psychology for Brentano, phenomenology for Husserl) and reflected the need to counter the social and political instability around them. Or, to apply another contextual paradigm: the open-endedness of Husserlian object theory might be a transposed philosophical attempt to embrace a more benign pluralism than the ethnic and religious conflict witnessed in the late-nineteenth-century empire. But these contextualizations, more metaphorical than evidence-based, sound strained and oversimplified.

We could, of course, link cultural production to more personal events, such as Husserl's tragic loss of a son in World War I or Brentano's marriage to Ida Lieben. Surely these life events played a crucial role in the development of their ideas. Psychological theories might have plenty to say about how Husserl found solace after his son's death in redoubling his philosophical labors or how Brentano's frustration with the Austrian authorities helped to attenuate his publishing output. But it is equally true that personal and intellectual commitments are compartmentalized in complex ways and do not join together neatly as a whole. Acknowledging the truism that we are never impervious to our surroundings can give way to the easy assumption of coherence between external circumstances and intellectual production. The unity of intellectual life and social context, deceptively apparent from the outside, often collapses under close scrutiny.

What I propose instead of the field's strong contextualist priorities is to approach the Austrian setting in a different, more source-focused way. Rather than presupposing the more or less stable edifice of a fin-de-siècle Viennese milieu, intellectual historians should build outward from their sources toward contextual insights that are not predetermined by a dominant disciplinary paradigm. A renewed emphasis on close documentary analysis would help to avoid the pitfalls of fin-de-siècle generalization by prioritizing the source texts and artifacts themselves in the search for clues to their appropriate explanatory contexts. Although we cannot approach original documents without any contextual preconceptions, we can do a better job challenging some of the dominant ones. Documentary analysis, of course, entails its own interpretive challenges.[46] And it is certainly true that reference to historical context can help to explain the significance of some intellectual programs and prevent an overly formalist or insular approach to one's sources. A full understanding of Riegl's *Monumentwerke*, for example, requires knowledge of the Austrian state preoccupation with restoration and Riegl's connection to Vienna's museum world.[47] However, even in this case, initial concentration on Riegl's essays may demonstrate the need for a certain type of social and political situation and offer clues to the appropriate links to trace. It may reveal overlooked textual details that lead to new and unexpected *contextual* discoveries.

Hence, in counterbalancing the overwhelming contextualism of Austrian fin-de-siècle studies, a more direct and critical documentary focus need not ignore context altogether.

[46]La Capra's work demonstrates these challenges abundantly. In that light, I use the term "documentary analysis" to highlight the priority of texts and artifacts, not to invoke the naive view of texts as unproblematic windows on the past, a view that La Capra has done so much to question.

[47]On this topic, see Ernst Bacher, ed., *Kunstwerk oder Denkmal? Alois Riegls Schriften zur Denkmalpflege* (Vienna, 1995). For an account of Riegl's links to Vienna's museum world, see Diana Graham Reynolds's excellent *Alois Riegl and the Politics of Art History: Intellectual Traditions and Austrian Identity in Fin-de-siécle Vienna* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1997).

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Quite the contrary, by reversing the historiographical priority between an original source and its wider social milieu, documentary analysis may achieve new contextual insights that are carefully linked to primary evidence. This reversal requires two procedural changes. First, rather than launching scholarly analysis within a preset contextual framework or scouring the archives for details of an Austrian setting presumed to inform cultural production, cultural and intellectual historians should initiate projects by analyzing their specific primary materials for clues to the appropriate contexts. Second, scholars must return frequently to those sources in order to guide and regulate ongoing research. By placing priority on primary texts and artifacts—through critical scrutiny and comparisons of original sources, identification of textual clues to further research, tracing clues into secondary accounts and further primary sources, and frequent reference to source material in order to anchor contextual claims—Austrian historians may in fact *strengthen* their contextual claims. Context, as Husserl suggests, begins *within*, not outside, the sources.

To a certain extent, this procedural injunction must seem rather obvious to anyone trained in conventional historical methods. Yet it is hard for Austrian historians, steeped in the rich literature of the field, not to approach their individual projects with a preconceived contextual framework that serves as a passe-partout for understanding the great variety of "Austrian" intellectual production. Although contextualist approaches have advanced our knowledge of turn-of-the-century Vienna, their strong assumptions threaten to hold back future research by prefiguring scholarly projects and conclusions. To reverse this methodological priority—to confront original sources *before* they are marked as Austrian; to unravel the loose threads of a textual fabric without promptly tying them to an Austrian weave—entails unlearning the dominant fin-de-siècle paradigms and reapplying critical source methods.

But doing so would have great historiographical benefits. Most importantly, it would allow scholars to notice the individual variations and idiosyncrasies at work in their objects of study. Documentary sources, perhaps especially the complex texts studied by cultural and intellectual historians, illuminate the traces of their own contexts in the implicit and explicit clues they offer to the careful reader. As Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, whose influence so pervaded Vienna, noted: "[I]n order to have an idea of *place*, and consequently of space, it is sufficient to consider these *relations* [among things], and the rules of their changes, without needing to face any absolute reality *outside* the things whose situation we consider."[48] The appropriate contexts for understanding Husserl (Moravian-Jewish upbringing, Brentanian training, conversion to Lutheranism, German university politics) are different from those appropriate to Riegl (more Viennese in his lifelong ambit, exposed to the hyper-empiricism of the Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung, deeply invested in the museum world), differences that become evident when the close scrutiny of their works leads to a careful reconstruction of their distinct intellectual milieux. Viewing their superficially similar educational experiences within the appealing fold of a singular Viennese cultural setting would simplify and mislead. For fin-de-siècle Vienna was not one context but many—ever plural, multitudinous, and nonexclusive. Historians should seek to understand how various contexts (intellectual, cultural, social, political, institutional, economic, religious, ethnic, etc.) converged on a single figure, oeuvre, or work; and how individual figures and groups contributed to the wider plurality of cultural contexts, interacting with each other in complex and unexpected ways.

[48]Quoted in Charles Sherover, *The Human Experience of Time* (New York, 1975), 141.

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Deeper understanding of the many contexts of Austrian intellectual life begins by relinquishing the ideal of Vienna as a cozy little world.

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