

with care and attention. It is about time that both of Simondon's major texts were available in English, and this translation has now fulfilled that demand. Discussions of Simondon's work to date have tended to remain

somewhat reverent of their author. The widening of access that these volumes offer will hopefully enable closer and more critical appraisals of *Individuation*, which is, after all, what significant books deserve.

Gus Hewlett

Between context and transcendence

Martin Jay, *Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022). 280pp., £26.99 hb., 978 0 81225 340 5

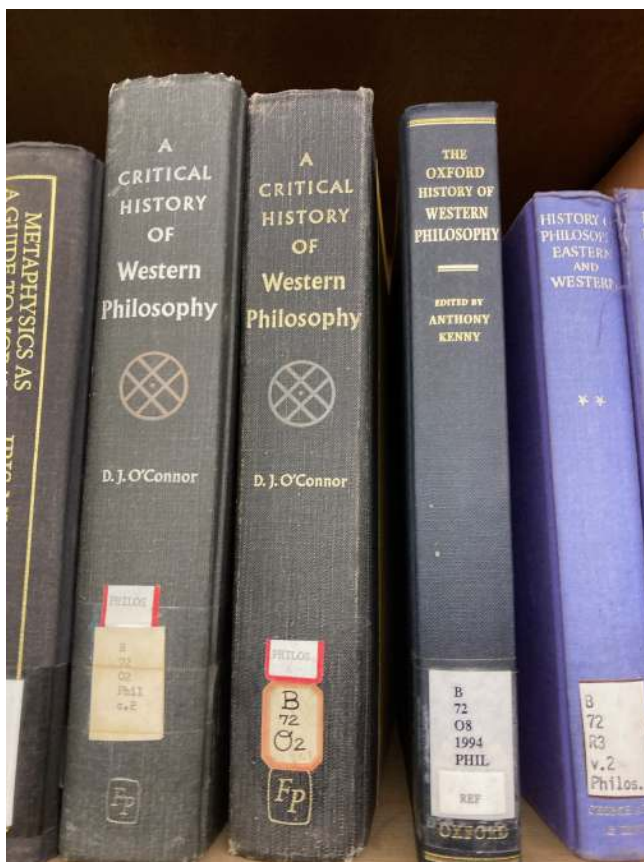
Can ideas transcend the context of their appearance? Can concepts depose the particularity of their origin to achieve validity? In the opening pages to a new collection of essays on the theory and practice of intellectual history, Martin Jay argues that such questions have been around 'at least' since the dawn of writing systems. They emerged, he claims, when different cultures came into contact with one another and realised the unhappy fact that their truths might be contingent. The questions Jay wants to ask are as such ancient, 'perennial' and valid – worthy of study because of the essentially extensive nature of the problems posed: about the possibility of harmony between cultures, of agreeing upon universal truths, and of a dialogical 'learning process' that might be contained therein.

It is a strikingly sweeping claim with which to begin a book on intellectual history, especially given that intellectual historical trends of the past decades have departed from grand, quasi-anthropological gestures towards the enduring or even ancient nature of 'big ideas' in favour of the more modest task of parsing a term or text in its context. Jay's insistence on the forever character of questions concerning genesis and validity acts, however, as preparatory motif to his commitment throughout the course of the book to resurrect validity itself as an important pillar (and perhaps lodestar) of intellectual historical work, despite the rise of contextualist preference for 'genesis' and its attendant forgetting of meaningful universals. We should not shy away, he contends, from recognising the transcendent *experiential* structure that contains historical work in the first place; and with it, the prospect of imbuing philosophical questions with appropriate grandeur.

There are ostensibly political reasons to want to hold onto validity. Following the lead of a slew of recent books about 'decolonising' or otherwise rerouting critical theory, the introduction pays lip-service to now familiar hand-wringing about 'relativism', or the weakening of broad-base political and social concepts, like human rights, that has accompanied critiques of Eurocentrism's false claims to universality. Jay also worries that 'identity politics' has trapped us into a relativism of 'situatedness' whereby we must always 'say where we're coming from' (or be forced to repeat our 'genesis'). On the flipside, too much validity can also be a dangerous thing. Naively advocating for the universal applicability of ideas might lead one to become much like 'American neoconservatives during the administration of George W. Bush' who wanted to export capitalist democracy abroad. The book ultimately provides a diplomatic attempt to dialectically reconcile these two schools or approaches to intellectual history – the genetic and the valid, contextualist and warily universalist, relativist and imperialist, 'the Cambridge School' and the Frankfurt School (or at least its American proponents) – arguing that the 'relationship between genesis and validity is not necessarily adversarial.' Yet, the delamination of the very terms of his title from their context sometimes betrays a preference for the valid that confuses the possibility of achieving a happy medium.

Rather than going back to writing systems at the dawn of time, nineteenth-century German philosophy might be one place to return to in order to understand the present tensions between different methodological approaches in contemporary intellectual history. Or, to call upon the language of 'genesis', a healthy dose of context can help us to denaturalise what Jay takes to be

perennial. In the 1820s, historicism – a much-contested term applied to rag-tag intellectual movements broadly committed to making history scientific – was on the rise. While many agreed upon the general principles of historicism, a slew of different camps emerged with competing ideas about its scope and method. As intellectual historians Herbert Schnädelbach, Frederick Beiser and others have detailed, these camps were often cut along the lines of Hegelian idealist-historicists, who believed that historicism could be compatible with speculative philosophy, and historicists who rejected the intrusion of metaphysics into empirical source-based work, notably Friedrich Carl von Savigny and Leopold von Ranke.



While philosophical historicists claimed that historicism was about discovering the general rules of world history and development of ideas over time, the empiricists argued for the cultural specificity or contingency of historical phenomena. These debates produced a few different competing tendencies that would extend into the twentieth century. Friedrich Meinecke's *Entstehungsgeschichte* and its emphasis on 'genesis' became closely intertwined with liberal nationalism in Germany and the theory of the state. Around the same time, neo-

Kantianism became concerned with rescuing historicism from relativism by injecting it with a bit of transcendence. Neo-Kantians, reworking the paradigmatic Kantian distinction between *quaestio quid facti*, regarding the origins or 'genesis' of knowledge, and the *quaestio quid juris*, regarding the validity of knowledge, argued that establishing the validity (*Geltung*) – or objectivity – of historical judgments would show that they are not merely relativist or subjective, but structured by an internal relationship to universality.

These different emphases – on a historicism that is in touch with the transcendent and one in which it is cordoned-off – have ricocheted throughout the past centuries in rotating shapes. By giving his book the title *Genesis and Validity*, it seems, on the one hand, that Jay is suggestively extending the vocabularies of these older historicism debates, showing us how intellectual history itself is formed through them. Indeed, there might be much to be gained from understanding contextualism, and its deep-seated focus on state theory and political thought, as a distant relative of the 'genetic' empirical-historicist perspective; and from understanding critical theory's insistence on validity as an unwitting extension of neo-Kantian frameworks (as Gillian Rose has argued). On the other hand, Jay takes for granted the reader's familiarity with this terminology, and never makes explicit why it is he uses this pairing in the first place. What does he think is to be gained by framing these conflicts in terms of validity and genesis? It is something that readers have to sort out for themselves over the course of thirteen wide-ranging chapters that contribute to articulating the state of the present stand-off, and possibly resolving it.

Each chapter of the book is a republished essay or article from the past decade, with contributions on free speech debates and photography somewhat shoehorned in. Nearly half of them are dedicated to tackling the Cambridge School, and Quentin Skinner's contextualist approach to intellectual history, head on. Like the empirical historicists of yesteryear, for Jay, contextualists have made a devil's bargain in which more historical rationality is exchanged for a loss of meaning or philosophical horizon-line. He argues that 'contextualization and value relativism are often cozy bedfellows', which is a problem in part because it absolves a thinker of responsibility – their work becomes 'symptomatic' of a larger context.

It is true that contextualism can quickly turn into clerical work, and that contextualists can be disinterested in deeper philosophical readings. In methods' classes at the University of Cambridge, we were encouraged to look for smoking guns amid archival detritus (if we can finally show that Hobbes read X, then we can make the claim that Y). The search for smoking guns also means the closure of arguments one is able to make as an intellectual historian; in the absence of indelible proof, one cobbles together a series of contexts for understanding a given text, with the possible effect of underplaying its philosophical dimensions.

In riposte, Jay echoes Randall Collins's claim that intellectuals are precisely the people 'who produce de-contextualized ideas.' To ignore this is to denude ideas of their ability to 'transcend our parochial horizons' and shock us with 'the audacity of their insolent ambition' – which is to say, perhaps, the capacity of ideas to change and shape reality. On such a rosy view of the potential of what he calls 'big ideas', it makes sense that for Jay 'contextual explanation, however we construe it, is never sufficient.' Still, staying true to his aim in the introduction, Jay also recognises that there are problems with the 'opposite impulse' of valorising 'the transcendental implications of ideas.' Seeing the present as more capable than the past of 'learning moral lessons', or as in a better position for judging ideas of the past, can entail the 'loss of false hopes and the rejection of utopian dreams.'

Jay seems to be operating in the land of lost hopes and dreams himself. In a chapter on Lukács, he confesses that reading *History and Class Consciousness* in the present political landscape is an 'unbearable experience'. It is unbearable, he contends, because there are presently no other books at such a high theoretical level that are 'written by someone engaged in life-or-death political activity.' The decadence of the contemporary political landscape is backed up by a showstopping claim that youth today, unlike their predecessors who fought in the Spanish Civil War, are 'more likely to join a jihadist movement to restore a religious theocracy that would have seemed repugnant' to Lukács and his generation. Is Jay not here tumbling into precisely the pitfalls of a transcendental presentism he has tried to avoid? It's a difficult comment to shake off, a 'big idea' floating freely from any historical reality, which is a shame because such moments distract from the book's more immanent goal:

to find a way to integrate the escape of meaning into intellectual historical practice itself; and to make historians recognise the fact that 'there is meaning without context'.

To aid him in this task, Jay frequently calls upon historian Frank Ankersmit's idea of 'sublime historical experience' and philosopher Claude Romano's idea of the 'event'. Both concepts point out the way that we are always 'apprehending [historical events] on a horizon of meaning that they have opened themselves.' Phenomenological attentiveness can mediate between context and transcendence by showing that the past 'defies both reassuring contextualization' as well as 'the current standards of truth or value' that we might apply in an ameliorative critical reading. There is an analogue, Jay argues, to this kind of mediation in the field of art. Art proves that there is a 'recursivity between context and transcendence' that is invoked by terms like 'autonomy' and 'aura' (Adorno's and Benjamin's respectively). Art contains an 'inexhaustible surplus', much as the historical past, but also often depends on judgement of its 'genetic pedigree', or an evaluation of the context in which it was produced. It is this analogy that also, presumably, welds a joint between the book's essays on photography to its larger story about genesis and validity.

In further attempting to mediate between context and transcendence, Jay claims we would do well to follow in Jürgen Habermas' footsteps. We can draw up a 'post-facto model of development based on the latent rules underlying the evolution of a tradition of thought' that can be 'used as a normative standard' that measures past and present contradictions within thought against each other. As an example of a thinker who does just this, Jay cites Althusser's conception of the history of political thought as a series of 'aporias that propel later theorists to try to solve on a higher level.' In a footnote to this section, Jay seems unsure if all of this might be the task of social critic rather than of an intellectual historian proper. Certainly, Habermas and Althusser are not intellectual historians in any sense that history departments in Cambridge or Berkeley would recognise. Moreover, is not solving a series of interlocked aporias one characterisation of the task of philosophy?

This buried comment enhances the impression that the stand-off between genesis and validity is rather a proxy battle regarding the role of social criticism within

intellectual history, and intellectual history's conspicuously indeterminate relation to the production of philosophical ideas. The boundaries have always been a bit porous for Jay, who began his career as one of the first historians of the Frankfurt School's critical theory; the exposition of critical theory, and its attendant if sometimes opaque tendency towards 'emancipation', have shaped the parameters of his intellectual historical project. Sometimes this involves seeing the ways in which such tendencies are blocked. After all, much like Jay, the

current generation of Frankfurt School critical theorists are ensnared in a stalemate over intruding Eurocentrism, relativism and context, arguing that such forces undermine the capacity for social criticism in the first place. In writing a book that attempts to reconcile and deal with the same set of problems, Jay shows that one of intellectual history's most formidable if implicit goals has been to save philosophy from itself, and to set it back on its path.

Mimi Howard

Back from the future

Keti Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: eflux/University of Minnesota Press, 2020). 336pp., £22.99 pb., 978 1 51790 955 0

Spinoza's dictum that we ought to understand first – not ridicule, not cry, nor detest – is ignored surprisingly often, even in philosophical scholarship, when it comes to revising and appropriating intellectual labour from the context of 'real existing socialism' (RES). Such dismissal is usually not based on any kind of engagement with the contents and contexts of that project and thus ironically affirms what it pretends to criticise: since the intellectual labour and culture of RES, so it is said, were completely dependent on ideological givens, it may not be taken seriously, except perhaps in its early phases or dissident aspects. This view, apart from being historically inadequate, begs the question of its own ideological dependence and amounts to a taboo, cutting off past experiences, achievements and failures, debates and struggles from contemporary appropriation, which could help us to understand our own times better. In fact, the communist heritage of RES continues to pose a challenge not only in 'post-communist' contexts but globally.

Keti Chukhrov's recent book *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* can be best evaluated as an intervention in contemporary theoretical and cultural debates. It presents a perspective that uses cultural production in 'historical socialism', as she calls it, as a model to rethink the connection of political economy and cultural production in terms of alternatives to contemporary art and critical theory.

In its own way, the book thus relates to the question of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, Jameson et al.) without discussing it explicitly. Chukhrov does not refute that analysis of the internalisation of neoliberal capitalism, but from the outset widens its scope, historically and methodologically. If capitalist mechanisms of extraction have infiltrated our minds so pervasively that they manage our desires, what about desire in socialism? Against the naturalisation of libidinal economy (an argument often used to explain the demise of RES), she argues that in a different society with a different political economy the emergence, meaning and expression of desire changes along with other 'ontics'. In this sense, cultural production in RES seems somewhat futuristic today.

This bold claim probably encompasses more than a single book can account for. Accordingly, Chukhrov aims at giving hints in this direction rather than trying to prove the hypothesis. With its four loosely interwoven parts – Political Economy, Sexuality, Aesthetics, and Philosophic Ontics of Communism – the book is best read as partly exploring and partly experimenting with communist thought embodied in late Soviet works, ranging from philosophical to artistic projects, to this end. What Chukhrov aims to unveil in these works is the actual experience of being part of a project towards the common good, reflecting the cultural implications of a non-surplus-value-economy on different levels.