
1 INTRODUCTION

Everything should be made as simple as possible,
but not simpler.

Albert Einstein

Over the last twenty years the concept of context has had wide currency throughout the social sciences and the humanities. In art and literary history it has meant attempting to understand the social, political, and intellectual environments in which various masterpieces of Western culture, from Shakespeare to Renaissance art to Machiavelli, were produced. These attempts have emphasized that human action is not understandable ripped out of its sociological, cultural, and historical nexus of reference. These calls to context have been made to stress the variability – if not the capriciousness – of human behavior; they attempt to “de-universalize” knowledge and meaning.

In contrast, the social sciences in their more behavioralist and positivist modes have sought laws of behavior and generalizations independent of culture and historical accident. After years of effort one may come to the conclusion that simple context-free laws of behavior do not exist. Researchers have often found that relationships may be positive in one period and then negative in the next or changing from one country to another (e.g., Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). From the empirical literature in world politics the conclusion imposes itself: simple bivariate hypotheses have no simple answer.

Just as the meaning of words cannot be completely specified by dictionaries, so simple laws of international behavior may not exist. To understand the meanings of words we need a theory of pragmatics, so in international relations we need a theory of context. This book examines some contexts and how they influence the way states act. For example,

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the relation of the individual state to the structure of the international system has occupied scholars of international relations over the last few decades. Some have argued that the structure of the system – be it bipolar or multipolar – determines in large part how nations act (Deutsch and Singer 1964; Waltz 1964). At the same time most believe that governments have some freedom of choice. A largely uncharted area is the character of the relationship between structure and individual: To what degree does system structure *determine* individual state behavior? Or, conversely, how much room does system structure *permit* for individual differences? The problem of the mechanisms connecting the international environment to individual states – or rather, from my point of view, their interaction – is one focus of the problematique of context. One goal of this book is to construct some contextual tools that facilitate the construction of theories about how states relate to their environments. Like all tools they work better for some purposes than others, but I suggest that they are tools scholars of world politics might want to keep handy.

Depending on the theoretical perspective the environment is accorded more or less weight in determining behavior, its impact is variously described as “cause,” “factor,” “determinant,” “influence,” “constraint,” “intervening variable,” etc. A perusal of *Roget's thesaurus* or the literature of world politics might suggest that these words are synonyms. Even though “influence” suggests less impact than “cause,” it is not clear whether this is a theoretical claim or just modesty on the part of the author (not to mention the bad influence of the generalized passive voice in social science writing). Nevertheless, in the final statistical wash these concepts appear to be little different because they all tend to be formalized in regression models with the corresponding causal interpretation. One important part of developing a contextual tool box is considering the different ways – what I shall call “modes” – that individuals and environments interact. It is important to understand how the environment can “cause” behavior, but this does not constitute the only possible kind of impact it can have.

This book is also about some contexts of world politics. International power structures are one important context but there are others; regime theory points to normative structures. One fallout of regime analysis is the recognition of the plethora of rule contexts within which nations operate. Between global contexts and individual states there is a wide range of middle-level contexts that affect regions and issue areas. Through the

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emphasis on plural contexts I suggest that states live in multiple environments.¹ These contexts often overlap but at the same time may be quite distinct. Even within the standard power politics mode of analysis this is the case. For a world system theorist the nineteenth century is one of British hegemony, but a specialist on European politics finds this century to be the archetype of a multipolar balance-of-power system. Likewise the post-World War II period is one of US hegemony for international economists and a bipolar one for security analysts. This book discusses several substantive contexts, norms, power structures, and history, providing concrete applications and examples of each.

In order to address the complex of problems related to individual–environment relations, the concept of context provides the key overarching concept. One aspect of context is the *relationship* between a state and its surroundings or history. I discuss three *modes* of context in this book:

- 1 Context as cause. This is the default category. Though different terms may be used, they all mean cause as contributing to a globally sufficient condition for the outcome: the context is neither individually necessary nor sufficient, but in conjunction with other factors it explains the outcome or makes it more likely.

Though the issues are rarely discussed as such, most empirical studies using system or group variables treat them as just ordinary variables, implicitly giving them the same causal interpretation as the individual-level variables. As such system-level variables have no different theoretical status; they are just part of the laundry list of possible causes. Depending on the problem cause may be the appropriate interpretation, but due to the lack of alternative ways of thinking about individual–environment relations contextual effects are virtually always interpreted as causes.

- 2 Context as barrier. The Sprouts' (1965) notion of "environmental possibilism" means that options open to governments are limited; states have a certain degree of freedom of maneuver, but external constraints block many desirable goals. Barriers exist which prevent decision-makers from achieving desired ends.

¹ The emphasis on the multiplicity of contexts raises the question of the relation between contexts. When I speak of contextual theory I refer to individual–context relations, but a theory to be developed is one about intercontext relations (I return briefly to this in the Postface).

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Once attentive to metaphors such as barrier and constraint it is striking how frequently they arise in the discussion of world politics. It is somewhat surprising that there appear to have been no serious attempts to develop methodologies and theories that move beyond the metaphorical. Barriers have characteristics that significantly differentiate them from positive causes. (Deterrence theory is an element of the class of barrier theories.) In fact, barriers are “counteracting causes” – they *prevent* actions – and as a result have a different epistemological status.

- 3 Context as changing meaning. Just as words mean different things when uttered in different sentences or social situations, so can the relationship between cause and effect vary according to the surroundings in which behavior occurs.

This is probably the most subtle contextual mechanism. The potential importance of this mode of context can be seen by noting how frequently the correlation coefficient between two variables changes with spatial-temporal domain. The correlation between two variables may be strongly positive in one century and negative in another: the two factors are important in both centuries but in different ways (this may be true even when controlling for all relevant variables). This rather simple, but abstract, concept of context turns out to have a variety of interesting consequences for theory, research design, and modeling.

In addition to these three modes of relationship, I discuss three *substantive* contexts that influence state behavior:

- 1 The structure of the international system. This has long been studied as a “cause” of war. However, I think that the contextual approach provides new insights in this overmined vein of research. By far the most important context, at least in the number of pages devoted to it, is the power structure of the international system. This literature has most often centered on system polarity, expressed either through alliances or geographic power configurations. What is curious about this work, which now seems a bit passé (though see Mansfield 1993), is that analyses were virtually always performed at the system level. There was the implicit notion that since the independent variable, say, system polarity, was a system-level variable so too should be the dependent variable –

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the amount of war in the whole world. There were arguments why individual behavior should aggregate to certain system-level sums, but there was little about how system structure affects individual behavior and dyadic relationships, the across-level impact of systems on individuals.

- 2 The historical context of behavior. One commonplace notion is that history is important in understanding world politics. However, beyond the mode of historical narration, there is little theoretical or empirical work on *why* or *how* past actions are related to present behavior. What are the mechanics of the relationship? Is there more that we can do than to provide convincing narratives?

In spite of the putative importance of history, a glance at the quantitative research on international conflict reveals its virtual absence. Normally each event is considered a separate case, torn from its historical context. A simple indicator of this is the lack of historical variables in statistical and formal models. With the exception of concepts such as arms race, lateral pressure, and power transition, it is not at all clear how yesterday is related to today and tomorrow. History forms an important context, since even though in many respects nations find themselves in the same situation, their historical development and experience mean that they may act differently: an idea succinctly expressed in the concept of path dependency.

- 3 The normative environment. Many realists have generally ignored, at least until the resurgence of interest in “international regimes” (Krasner 1983b), that states exist in an environment of rules and norms that influences their calculations and their goals. The usual realist claim is that international norms, often in the form of international law, have little impact on state behavior. But this leaves puzzles unexplained: Why does the demand for elections form a part of US foreign policy? Why does apartheid affect policies toward South Africa?

The merit of regime theory is to have signaled the existence and the importance of the normative context. But the regime literature offers little guidance on conceptualizing and formalizing *how* this context influences behavior. With the important exception of Kegley and Raymond (1990), there have been few attempts to measure norms, to empirically and rigorously assess their impact,

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and to chart their evolution over time. In particular there is great unease and uncertainty about how these rules (which after all have no material existence) can “cause” behavior. Again, the problem is the relation between a system-level variable – norms – and individual state behavior.

Diffusion and rationality

Two constant theoretical companions throughout this volume are rational actor and diffusion models. The former is already quite familiar to students of world politics through the work of Bueno de Mesquita and others who have applied decision theory and game theory to problems of international conflict. Diffusion models also are present in the literature – though not as prominently – in the work of Starr, Siverson, and Most. These two frameworks represent two different visions of individual–environment relations. Diffusion models are “causal” focusing on the past, while rational actor models are “intentional” emphasizing the future (Elster 1979). Diffusion models emphasize the role of the environment in determining behavior, while rational actor models focus on the decision-maker whose beliefs and desires determine her behavior. Diffusion models are “top-down,” while rational actor models are “bottom-up.” Their intellectual homes differ as well, rational actor models come from economics, while diffusion models originate in anthropology and geography. Since contextual theory is about the interaction of the bottom with the top these two theories are natural points of orientation.

Rational models also serve as a “null hypothesis” for a number of problems raised by the emphasis on context. The focus on context raises questions about the interconnectedness of events across time and space. One problem that reoccurs is that phenomena are not evenly or randomly distributed in space or time; they appear in clumps or clusters. From a rational actor point of view this clustering, be it oil nationalization, decolonization, or repeated conflict, is an epiphenomenon of repeated or changing rational calculation.

Stressing context also highlights aspects of rational actor models normally taken as exogenous, in particular the goals and preferences of decision-makers. Explaining why a state has certain goals, why its preferences change, and what is legitimate in the international system are often just as important as the discussion of the means of efficiently arriving at a goal. An

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analysis of the normative context of state behavior emphasizes that goals and values must not be assumed but investigated, that they vary over space and time. In addition rational models usually take the “feasible set” as given; the concept of context as a barrier suggests that changing systematic constraints are fundamental in explaining why certain phenomena occur.

Diffusion models provide one framework for explaining changes in preferences and the feasible set. How are we to explain that environmental protection has become part of the values (at least the publicly expressed values, e.g., George Bush) of many leaders? Diffusion models provide one answer, through forces such as social pressure and imitation individuals acquire new desires. Most and Starr (1980) have used diffusion models to understand the spread of war; part of their argument is that the existence of wars in a region changes the feasible set of decision-makers (“opportunity” in Starr’s terms 1978).

Diffusion and rational actor models emphasize different aspects of the individual–environment problematique and hence will appear regularly in the discussion of these issues.

Is context less important than individual-level factors?

Depending on one’s basic theoretical position nation-level variables are put forward as more important than system-level variables (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman 1988), or vice versa (Waltz 1979), in explaining international behavior. For rational actor models the priority goes to individual-level preferences and power relationships. The environment may influence rational behavior because it is, for example, more or less uncertain – or more accurately knowledge about it is uncertain – but these aspects play a secondary role. Structural theories take the opposite view, the debate about system structure and war implies that these factors are primary in understanding world politics. (Hollis and Smith (1990) give a philosophically informed discussion of the relative importance of different levels of analysis.) The theory of context presented here focuses on the *interaction* of the two rather than arguing for structural determinism or methodological individualism.

The level of analysis concept (Singer 1969) is part of the conceptual tool kit of world politics scholars. Influential textbooks such as Russett and Starr’s (1992) are organized on its principles. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to find analyses that actually employ two levels of analysis simultaneously. Both theoretically and empirically the case studies in this

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volume attempt to integrate environmental and individual-level variables in various ways. The Sprouts (1965) explored in very general terms the man–milieu relationship, but never gave it concrete shape. It is easy to say that contexts are important but it is difficult to say how and why.

Many aspects of individual–environment relations that have exercised social scientists have also been central to natural history. The explanation of evolution by the theory of natural selection is exemplary in this regard. Natural selection theories assume that there is variation within species (and between species for some, e.g., Eldredge 1985) which is then selected upon by the environment (see Mayr 1982 for a description of how the two interact). Natural selection is a theory of interaction between individuals and their environments. For Darwin the mechanism producing variation was a black box much like the black box that system theorists use to describe decision-making processes. And like international relations researchers, biologists tend to choose one level or the other for research, biology being divided between naturalists and geneticists until a synthesis of the two was achieved in the 1930s and 1940s. The evolutionary biologist uses the terminology proximate and ultimate causes (Mayr 1988) to explain animal and plant characteristics: genes are the proximate cause of much animal behavior, but ultimately these behaviors are selected because changes in the environment choose (allow to survive) the best genetic program. Similarly, a complete theory of world politics will require adequate linking of domestic and bureaucratic processes with changing international environments.

One of the essential aspects of an emphasis on context is to rid us of the idea that structural or individualistic paradigms are universal panaceas. There are situations where structures are quite constraining and others where individual choice has a large field of action. In part this is an empirical question to be answered by the estimates of different parameters in contextual models. These models contain parameters that represent system-level, individual-level, and interaction variables. Statistical estimates can help answer the question of relative importance. It seems fruitless to argue about these issues in general; what we need is a framework that allows data to provide an appropriate response to the question. Nature can only answer a question if it is posed. If a model has only system-level or individual-level variables nature cannot add the missing elements.

Metaphors and theories

One subtheme that runs throughout this investigation of context is how metaphorical theoretical language is. This does not come as a surprise to post-structuralists (Der Derian and Shapiro 1989) who look at theories and the world as texts (that is their metaphor!). Metaphors can be quite useful in thinking about the world, but all metaphors carry theoretical baggage with them. Much of this volume can be seen as an analysis of some common metaphors of world politics. Some I shall find hinder understanding, e.g., war as a contagious disease; others I find useful, e.g., system structure as a barrier. I have chosen the word “context” to represent a certain way of viewing a central problem of human behavior, but there is a whole list of related terms that illuminate various facets of the phenomenon:

- individual–environment
- level of analysis
- micro–macro
- structural realism (Waltz 1979)
- situational determinism
- constraint
- market
- structuration (Giddens 1984)
- willingness and opportunity (Starr 1978)

All these expressions, and others, imply a certain relation between an individual and its context. It is, unfortunately, often not clear what they really mean. Phrases like “system structure constrains . . .,” “in this situation a certain behavior is more likely,” or “market pressures forced . . .” are common but what is often lacking is an explicit mechanism or story linking states and environments. What is a “constraint?” How does one model it? Do markets “cause” certain behaviors? I too will use these expressions, but I shall try to be explicit as to what they mean. For example, Rosenau (1990) refers to micro–macro issues, but it is never clear *how* many micro decisions add up to macro phenomena. For him the result is often macro “turbulence”; the mechanisms that link the two are explained via metaphor and analogy. One common metaphor comes from the conflict literature in which war is described as “contagious.” I argue in chapter 5 that when a mechanism for war contagion is provided the metaphor breaks down (though not without providing some important insights into the phenomenon of war expansion). Context with its many implications appears best

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suited to weave the methodological and substantive threads I use. Careful attention to language highlights the ambiguity which lies just below the surface of much theoretical discourse.

Methodology

Developments in the philosophy and history of science associated with names like Lakatos, Kuhn, and Feyerabend have changed widely held views of natural science. There has been a realization in the “hard” sciences that there is no longer any privileged position; observers interact with the observed, there is no Archimedean point. This has been a move toward relativism, to views more often thought to be particular to the study of man. It is the realization in an important sense that all knowledge is local knowledge.

Philosophical judgments about what is possible or not, about the correct form of an explanation (e.g., methodological individualism) are futile because they depend on the course of actual scientific research. This does not mean it is not important to reflect on research approaches, but rather that such reflection should be motivated and tied to current research practices. Many of the big problems in the social sciences like man–environment relations, norms and regimes, measurement theory, and the scope of international relations theory will be treated below, but in the framework of particular theories and models, and in the application of them to empirical cases.

The emphasis of context has important methodological implications. It results in new ways to try to integrate state and system levels of analysis. Rare are studies that deal simultaneously with both levels. The emphasis on the interaction between a state and its environment leads to models quite different from the usual linear regression analyses. For example, if context is considered a barrier, one of the immediate implications is that the relationship is no longer linear.

One unifying thread of my empirical and theoretical approach is the state as the fundamental unit of analysis. In statistical terms the dependent variable is the action of individual states or pairs of states. The international-system-level factors, both as created by the action of states through norms, alliances, etc. and as represented by more static aspects such as power structures, are used as an explanatory factor, but I am not usually concerned with explaining the evolution of the system as such (i.e., as a dependent variable). Nevertheless, in examining international norms and barriers