

Reception History and the Historiography of Economics

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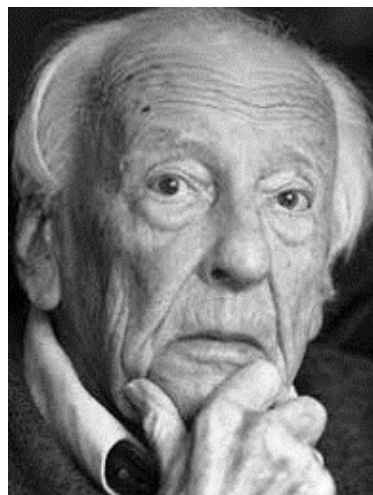
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Hans Robert Jauss



Hans-Georg Gadamer

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Abstract: This paper explores reception history as a framework for historians of economics in the light of the impasse between contextual and traditional historiography. It focuses on the particular reception history approach of the German literary critic Hans Robert Jauss, which is grounded in the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Jauss' reception approach is outlined then compared to the contextual historiography of Quentin Skinner, and Donald Winch, as well as to traditional historiography of economics exemplified by Joseph Schumpeter, George Stigler, Paul Samuelson and Mark Blaug. I argue that Jauss' reception history framework encompasses the contextual and traditional approaches, picking up the attention to original readers that is the strength of the contextual approach, while also validating attention to contemporary economist readers. It provides tools for more self-consciousness attention to the multiple contexts involved in the study of past economic texts. It thus offers a way forward in the historiographical impasse facing contemporary historians of economics.

Introduction

There is an impasse in our discipline between the traditional approaches to the history of economic thought and contextual approaches¹. Traditional approaches include works such as George Stigler's *Production and Distribution Theories* (Stigler 1941), Paul Samuelson's canonical classical model and advocacy of "Whig" history (Samuelson 1978, 1987), Joseph Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (Schumpeter 1954), and perhaps most sharply Mark Blaug's *Economic Theory in Retrospect* (Blaug 1996). There are differences between the approaches of these eminent historians of economic thought, divergences between their methodological pronouncements and practice (most obviously for Schumpeter), and that some have changed their position over time (for instance comparing the first and fifth editions of Blaug's *Economic Theory in Retrospect*)². Nevertheless, they are united in reading past economic texts from the perspective of present economics, a unity recognised by critics including Quentin Skinner (1969)³ and Donald Winch (1962, 2000, 2009, 2016), who described the impasse as a "dialogue of the deaf" (Winch 1997 p401, also his more pungent conference remarks Winch 1995).

Traditional historians of economic thought been accused of many sins: absolutism, anachronism, disciplinary insularity, teleology, idealism in the sense that economic ideas possess an internal logic of unfolding, the sin of writing "Whig" history, and even of not writing history at all. Most are little read outside the discipline of economics. Yet their audience and even legitimacy within economics is shrinking. However, the alternative contextual approach has its problems too. Such histories are little read by economists, though for some contextualists this is almost a badge of honour. Contextual methods also seem unable to support large scale diachronic histories. Donald Winch has mostly written about particular debates in carefully delimited periods and places, and watched his teacher Jacob Viner abandon the large-scale history of the relationship between religious thought and economic thought he had been working on for many years⁴. Some contextualist writing can

¹ Craufurd Goodwin (2008) offers a fair-minded survey of the state of the discipline of the history of economics at the beginning of the 21st century. There are other ways of describing the impasse, such as between internalist and externalist historiography, or Mark Blaug's (1996) contrast between relativist and absolutist approaches, which became a contrast between historical reconstruction and rational reconstruction. George Stigler (1965) contrasted scientific exegesis and personal exegesis of economic texts. Kenneth Boulding's (1971) discussion of the tension between the ancients and moderns remains for me one of the most insightful discussions of the impasse. Roger Backhouse (1992) sees the central issue as the constructedness of economic knowledge, while Roy Weintraub (1992) characterizes the impasse as between thick and thin histories.

² Differences between Stigler, Samuelson, Schumpeter, and Blaug, as well as literary taste counsel against use of a neologism such as "Stampetaug" for the "traditional historians of economic thought". I will similarly avoid "Burrinchini" for the Sussex contextualists Burrow, Winch and Collini.

³ Whatmore (2015) provides an overview of this type of intellectual history from a Cambridge School perspective – that of Quentin Skinner, JGA Pocock and John Dunn. Winch and colleagues influenced by the Cambridge School are sometimes labelled the Sussex School, for instance by Collini (2019 p481) who regards it as a convenient though not entirely satisfactory label. My discussion of the Cambridge and Sussex Schools has benefited from the earlier and not always reverent reviews of their work by Gregory Moore (2010) and Anthony Waterman (2002).

⁴ Donald Winch ended up editing a volume of unfinished chapters from Viner's abandoned project (Viner 1978). Part of my own motivation for this paper exploring Jauss' reception history approach comes from the historiographical issues with writing a monograph commissioned by Harvard University Press on history of Christian thinking about economics, similar to the book Viner previously abandoned. The paper has also been stimulated by joint work with Joost Hengstmengel on the history of Jacob Viner's universal economy doctrine (Hengstmengel and Oslington 2021), thinking about the way we understand the early theological reception of

be obtuse and somewhat turgid, at least measured by the tastes of economists (Moore 2010 p94). In spite of all of this, contextualists in recent years have claimed the historiographical high ground, with traditional historians of economic thought either ignoring the issues or writing with a certain embarrassment about the historiographical respectability of their enterprise.

The German literary critic Hans Robert Jauss (1921-97) outlined a similar impasse in his discipline of literary history in a 1967 lecture that has been described as “perhaps the most celebrated inaugural lecture in the history of German literary criticism” (translated as Jauss 1981, with the description coming from Holub 1995 p320). Positivist history and philology were dying. Its practitioners had reduced literary history to mere description of literary works, sometimes arranged according to themes and sometimes in the form of a series of “life and works” portraits of famous authors. Newer Marxist-inspired histories confined their attention to the conditions of production of literary works, while Russian formalist literary criticism seemed only capable of describing the internally driven evolution of stylistic tools. In Jauss’ view none of these provided a coherent and fruitful framework for writing literary history.

The fundamental problem identified by Jauss was the inability of the existing approaches to bridge the gap between the methods of literature and history⁵. In our discipline the analogous problem is the relationship between the methods of economics and history. Even some of the inadequate solutions in literary history have analogues in the history of economics - for instance the literary formalist accounts of the evolution of stylistic tools reminds one of internalist histories of economic theory.

Jauss’ solution for literary history was to step outside the philosophical worlds of the existing approaches and develop an aesthetics of reception, rooted in the hermeneutic philosophy of his teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer. In time this developed into what has become known in literary circles as reception theory or reception history⁶. This approach has been fruitful in literary history, though in that notoriously fractious discipline it struggles alongside other approaches. Within theology, reception history has come to dominate biblical studies, and is increasingly important in other subdisciplines of theology such as systematic theology and

Adam Smith’s work (Oslington 2018), and some further reflection on the nature of economic classics (Oslington 2013).

⁵ The problem recalls Lessing’s “ugly broad ditch” between the necessary truths of reason accidental truths of history. The quotation comes from his 1777 essay “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power” at page 55 in the Chadwick edition of *Lessing’s Theological Writings*.

⁶ Reception theory or history shares some common elements with the reader response criticism of Jauss’ Konstanz colleague Wolfgang Iser (1974, 1980), and with the “affective stylistics” of American critic Stanley Fish (1980, 1989). These approaches agree that the meaning of texts is open-ended rather than fixed in the past, but there are substantial differences between their accounts of the way meaning emerges or is constructed by readers. Their intellectual roots and connections are discussed by Holub (1995, 2013) and Eagleton (2008). A full survey of these approaches is well beyond the scope of this paper, and I’ve chosen to focus on the German tradition of Gadamer and Jauss rather than the Anglosphere equivalent Richard Rorty (1979, 1980) plays the part of Gadamer and Fish the place of Jauss. A survey would also have to give due acknowledgement to the pathbreaking explorations of Deirdre McCloskey and Arjo Klammer of the implications of literary criticism of Wayne Booth, Fish and others for economics (for instance McCloskey 1983, 1998, Klammer McCloskey and Solow 1988).

church history⁷. Perhaps a similar historiographical move would be fruitful for historians of economics.

A possible objection to using a theorist of literary history in relation to the history of economics is that economics is a science, and so historiography of science is surely more relevant. However, economics is a different sort of science to physics or biology, and as economics was taking shape as a discipline prominent practitioners wrote of the art of economics as well as the science (JN Keynes 1890). Deirdre McCloskey has emphasised this in her work on the rhetoric of economics (McCloskey 1983, 1998). I see my exploration of an approach from literary studies as complementing the valuable explorations of Margaret Schabas (1992), Roy Weintraub (2007, 2020) and others of what historians of economics might learn from recent historiography of science. It connects with longstanding calls for historiographical pluralism and tolerance (for instance Backhouse's 1992 p31) in our discipline.

The purpose of the paper is to outline the Jauss' reception history approach and connect it to problems in the historiography of economics. In particular, the ongoing and seemingly intractable divide between traditional and contextual histories of economics. While historiographical approaches must ultimately be assessed according to their capacity to generate better historical writing (a point Jauss makes at the end of his inaugural lecture) I will argue that the reception approach has several promising features for historians of economics, and most importantly encompasses and connects traditional and contextual approaches. Reception history pushes contextualists to extend their methods to consider later readers and their contexts, while pushing traditional historians to be more self-conscious and disciplined about their attention to the contemporary reader. The paper may be seen as an attempt to claim some of the historiographical high ground back from the contextualists. If nothing else it may encourage a better conversation between contextual and traditional historians of economics.

Reception History

Hans Robert Jauss' program for the renewal of literary history was set out in his 1967 University of Konstanz inaugural lecture (translated as "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" in Jauss 1981⁸), and his reception history approach developed in subsequent works (collected and translated in Jauss 1982, 1989)⁹.

⁷ Parris (2009) discusses reception theory in theology. Works such as Rush (1997) applying Jauss approach to church history, Thiselton (1992, 2012) and Roberts et al (2011) on biblical studies, are evidence of the large impact of reception theory in different subdisciplines of theology.

⁸ The German title of Jauss' inaugural lecture followed the title of Friedrich Schiller's famous inaugural lecture, with the substitution of "literary" for "universal" history. Jauss (1981 p5) drew on Schiller's standard of what good history looks like: offering instruction for the thoughtful observer, a model for the active man of the world to imitate, food for thought for the philosopher, and pleasure for the general reader. An English translation of Schiller's inaugural lecture is now available in the journal *History and Theory* (see Schiller 1789).

⁹ One of the issues which must be faced in writing about Jauss is the information that has come to light in recent years about his wartime service in the Waffen SS, the military branch of the Nazi Party's SS organisation. Jauss volunteered as a young man, served mostly in Eastern Europe, and was much decorated and rapidly promoted. After the war Jauss returned to civilian life and began his university studies. He claimed not to have participated in any wartime atrocities, and there is no firm evidence that he did, though various autobiographical omissions and evasions arouse suspicion (Ette 2017). The purpose of this paper is not to judge Jauss' character, but to assess and utilise his literary theory, and I do so with due acknowledgement of the darkness of his personal past.

An attractive feature of Jauss' reception approach compared to much modern literary theory is its historical orientation¹⁰. The problem he struggled with was how to write good literary history in the face of attention between the methods of literature and history.

In understanding Jauss proposal it is helpful to see how he drew on the philosophical hermeneutics of his Heidelberg teacher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's project was to ground and explicate humanistic understanding in an increasingly scientific twentieth century culture. This is not the place for a full exposition of Gadamer's philosophy, but reviewing certain points will be helpful in understanding Jauss reception history proposal¹¹.

He builds on Gadamer's critique of claims to objectivity in the natural sciences and historical sciences¹². This is not a rejection of science, just a rejection of certain philosophical claims about its grounding, and especially to extensions of the methods of the natural sciences to humanistic studies. As well as criticising certain early twentieth century positivistic philosophical claims about science Gadamer rejects subjectivism and romanticism that are usually proposed as alternatives. In the place of these flawed approaches Gadamer develops his philosophical hermeneutics, drawing on his teacher Heidegger's analysis of Being and the long-standing craft of textual interpretation. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics radicalises and universalises the tradition of textual interpretation¹³.

Key components of this philosophical hermeneutics include a rehabilitation of the pre-understanding of the interpreter (against the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice"), recognition of the importance of the tradition the interpreter stands in, the inescapable and fruitful role of the hermeneutic circle, and temporal distance as productive of understanding rather than a barrier to understanding.

In Gadamer's view enquiry into the history of effects of a text¹⁴ is not an optional add-on but essential to understanding because the history of effects forms part of the interpreters pre-understanding. Lack of self-consciousness of one's pre-understanding is a source of much misunderstanding. To aid self-consciousness Gadamer introduces the concept of the horizon

¹⁰ There are some German terminological subtleties as discussed by Parris (2009 p117-8). A cluster of closely related terms includes *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of the effects of a text), *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (the history of reception), *Wirkungsästhetik* (the aesthetics of effect or response), and Jauss term *Rezeptionsästhetik* (aesthetics of reception). Parris follows Holub's policy where 'reception theory' refers throughout to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader." Parris' choice of 'reception theory' as an inclusive English term makes sense for a biblical scholar seeking a theory of interpretation, but in this paper I prefer the term "reception history" to emphasise the historical element of Jauss' project. Note that the title of Jauss' programmatic lecture portrays "history" as a challenge to "theory".

¹¹ Gadamer's major work, translated as *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 1960), along with his explanatory lecture (Gadamer 1975) are the sources for this brief summary. The secondary literature is vast, including Grondin (1999, 2003) and Bernstein (1983), a work I have found particularly helpful.

¹² *Geisteswissenschaften*, sometimes rendered by Gadamer's translators as moral sciences, and sometimes as historical sciences. Either way the German sense of science is much broader than the English term.

¹³ This paper concentrates on the issue of interpreting past economic texts, but Gadamer and others within the hermeneutic tradition such as Paul Ricoeur have observed that the problem of interpreting human action is similar to the problem of interpreting texts. If so, the hermeneutic tradition is relevant not just to the history of economics but to economics itself. Some Austrian economists, especially Don Lavoie, began to explore this in the 1980s but this research seems to have now come to a dead end.

¹⁴ *Wirkungsgeschichte* does not have a clear English equivalent. Gadamer prefers "effective history" to distinguish what he is proposing from the mere cataloguing of subsequent interpretations. His translators tend to prefer "history of effects", though recognising that this more precise English term can be easily misinterpreted as something separable from the act of understanding.

of the interpreter, so that understanding is a fusion of the horizons of the text and the interpreter¹⁵.

An essential element, according to Gadamer, of coming to understand a text is the process of question-and-answer. Questions addressed to the text come explicitly and without apology from the horizon of the interpreter, though with appropriate self-consciousness of that horizon. For Gadamer there can be no pretence that the interpreter is able to wind back time or discard their own horizon (as per positivistic historiography) or that the interpreter is able to get inside the heads of the author and original readers through some sort of intuitive process (as per romantic historiography). Gadamer stresses that the process of question-and-answer is always engagement with the text itself, not merely an engagement with the horizon of the text.

Finally, for Gadamer, there is a fundamental unity between understanding, interpretation and application. One cannot fully understand a text without applying a text in one's own situation. In this sense texts are open to the future, but not completely or arbitrarily open in the manner of some contemporary literary criticism.

After this brief review of the relevant concepts in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, it is time to turn to Jauss' proposal for an aesthetics of reception.

The most important move Jauss makes to renew literary history is to shift the emphasis from authorship of works to reception of texts. The first of seven theses in his inaugural lecture concerns this: "A renewal of literary history demands the removal of the prejudices of historical objectivism and the grounding of the traditional aesthetics of production and representation in an aesthetics of reception and influence." (Jauss 1981 p20). This change in emphasis flows from Gadamer's critique of objectivity and argument about the history of the effects of a text being integral to interpretation because these form part of the interpreters pre-understanding. The importance of this change of emphasis is reinforced in Jauss' late career reflections on reception history: "I tried to imagine a new literary history, one that opened the closed circuit of author and work in the direction of the receiver, and was meant to make of this receiver, whether a reader or the public, the intermediary between the past and the present" (Jauss 1989 p224).

What Jauss means by overcoming "historical objectivism" is recognising that "A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence" (Jauss 1981 p21)¹⁶. Following Gadamer, he argues that the readers historical distance from the text is not a barrier to be overcome but constitutive of understanding.

How then is understanding actually achieved? Jauss criticises the view that understanding of a past text can be achieved directly through intuition, for the intuition of a reader lacking appreciation of her own historical context can be dangerously misleading, even intuition informed by the accumulation of more and more data about the original context. The basic problem of the interpreter's lack of historical self-consciousness cannot be solved by more data.

¹⁵ *Hirzont* translated as horizon.

¹⁶ A somewhat similar point is made by RG Collingwood's well-known aphorism "History is nothing but the reenactment of past thought in the historian's mind" (quoted by both Gadamer and Jauss, and the original may be found in Collingwood 1946 p228).

At this point Jauss develops Gadamer's discussion of horizons into the concept of a "horizon of expectation" which he offers as a tool for achieving understanding¹⁷. The horizon of expectation is a multidimensional concept, comprising literary genre, content, and socio-economic effects. Both the horizon of expectation of the original readers of the text and the horizon of the subsequent readers must be reconstructed, and understanding emerges through their interaction as the historian engages with the text¹⁸. A literary historian must consider "the reception and the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance" (Jauss 1981 22, quoting from the second thesis of his inaugural lecture). This historical element of the horizon of expectation acts as a control on complete subjectivism and arbitrariness of readings. Or as he expresses it more clearly in a later work, we "can have a grasp of things past and their differentness only when and to the degree that the interpreter knows how to differentiate between his own and the alien horizon. The work of historical understanding requires a conscious, fully implemented mediation between the two horizons" (Jauss 1989 p197)¹⁹.

How then are horizons of expectation actually reconstructed by the historian? There may be expectational clues in the text itself, but for Jauss it is the context that it is most important element. One of the strengths of Jauss' approach is his broader understanding of context – Jauss' concept the horizon of expectation also includes literary genre, content, and socio-economic effects as well as the. This means that the historian reconstructing a horizon of expectation must attend to the genre and content of works in the tradition. It is not just a matter of appreciating the immediate context of the text being studied. Expectations about socio-economic effects also part of the horizon of expectation – and this is particularly important for texts that we as historians of economics study. Jauss emphasises that these methods must be applied rigorously not just to the horizon of expectation of the original readers of the text but also to the horizon of the later readers. It is absolutely crucial to overcome the unrecognised arbitrariness and unreflective subjectivity of the existing contextualist approaches that the horizon of later readers is reconstructed with the same rigour that the original horizon of the

¹⁷ The term horizon has interesting linguistic history, recounted by Jauss (1989 p199). For Jauss, as for Gadamer, a horizon is essentially a limitation of our gaze.

¹⁸ Jauss observes also how texts, especially great texts, challenge their horizon of expectation, giving rise to Jauss' concept of aesthetic distance, "the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work" (Jauss p25, quoting from his third thesis). Horizons of expectation are specific to contexts, and a text which was ignored or rejected by its original readers because of its distance from their horizon of expectation may later be appreciated as it comes to align with subsequent readers horizons. An example Jauss (1981 p29) gives is Feydeau's novel *Fanny* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* both published in 1857. Feydeau's novel was initially popular as it aligned with contemporary readers horizon of expectation, but over time as the horizon moved it was *Madame Bovary* which was recognised as a great novel. Texts may stretch readers horizons of expectation and contribute to the eventual alignment of horizon of the reader with that of the text. With great works of art Jauss emphasises that even when the horizon of expectation aligns with the work we need as readers to struggle to remain alert to the strangeness of the work in its original horizon of expectation.

¹⁹ Jauss resists Gadamer's suggestion that understanding is a fusion of horizons, that "understanding is always the process of the fusion of these horizons that we suppose to exist by themselves. (Jauss 1981 p30, quoting Gadamer). Gadamer's confidence about the possibility of a fusion of horizons comes from his faith in the unity of human experience, going back to Heidegger's teaching about the unity of Being. Gadamer even writes that the separateness of different readers horizons is ultimately illusory. Jauss resistance to equating understanding with the fusion of horizons reflects his own experience of literary critic of the foreignness of the horizon of expectation in his work on mediaeval French literature (including literature about mythical beasts), and also his experience of the fruitfulness for interpretation of maintaining the tension between the horizon of the text and one's own horizon.

text is reconstructed. Jauss, like Gadamer holds that texts are open to the future, but not completely or arbitrarily so. He is scathing about the historicist delusion that we can bracket our own historical location, and the dire consequences for understanding if we proceed as if it can be bracketed.

Against critics who suggest that horizons of expectation are arbitrary because there are as many expectations as there are readers, Jauss argues that this reconstruction of the horizon of expectations is an objectifiable (or at least an intersubjective) process, drawing on Gadamer's notion of a tradition, which transcends the arbitrary, subjective and historically inaccessible thoughts of an individual. Traditions in which the author and original readers stand are more accessible to the historian than the mind of the author or past readers. As are traditions in which later readers stand. The horizon of expectation is thus not merely the arbitrary expectation of a particular reader, whether an original reader or a later reader²⁰.

Once the relevant horizons of expectation are reconstructed, the search for understanding proceeds through question and answer. The reader or literary historian, fully conscious of their own horizon of expectation poses questions to the text, recognising the text's own, possibly very foreign, horizon of expectation. The text may resist the interpreter's line of questioning. It may challenge the presuppositions of the interpreter. If so, questions will be reformulated and tentative interpretations revised, until an equilibrium emerges.

Thus far the diachronic aspects of seeking understanding have been emphasised, but there is also for Jauss a synchronic aspect to writing literary history. The synchronic aspect of the task is "to arrange the heterogeneous multiplicity of contemporaneous works in equivalent, opposing, and hierarchical structures, and thereby to discover an overarching system of relationships in the literature of a historical moment" (Jauss 1981 p36, quoting his sixth inaugural lecture thesis). Jauss had in mind the tools of Russian literary formalism, but the analogy in our discipline is economic theory which can be used synchronically to order the heterogeneous multiplicity of economic works. This is important as it provides a legitimate place for rational reconstruction. Using contemporary economic theory to attempt to reconstruct the model in a past economic text for Jauss would be a way of taking our questions to a past economic text as part of the interpretative process. But notice too that Jauss emphasises the inescapable organising or ordering role of contemporary literary or economic theory as we approach past texts.

As for Gadamer, there is a "hermeneutic triad of understanding, interpretation and application" (Jauss 1989 p198). Coming to an understanding a text is the process that I have been describing - involving reconstructing horizons of expectation, question-and-answer processes, and perhaps synchronic contributions from literary or economic theory. Interpretation is the next step of actually writing the history, whether that be a history of literature or a history of economics. The final element of the triad is application, where the

²⁰ It is interesting to contrast Jauss' defence against pure subjectivity in interpretation - the horizon as a historical reconstruction of the tradition within which the reader sits - with Stanley Fish's defence that an interpretive community rather than an individual reader is the arbiter of truth in interpretation. Fish's interpretive communities seem to me much more arbitrary and their interpretive criteria less stable than Jauss' traditions. Wolfgang Iser's implied reader is reconstructed from the text itself, and so appears less arbitrary than either Jauss' tradition or Fish's interpretive community. The problem with Iser's seemingly attractive proposal is that the implied reader may not be able to be reconstructed without reference to the context, and if so we are back facing the same arbitrariness of interpretation that Fish exults.

history enters the world action and effects. This element of the triad legitimates historians of economics interacting with contemporary economic theory and action, something that contextual historians of economics contort themselves to avoid the appearance of.

A question that is often asked about reception history approaches is what happens to the author and his or her intentions? Is the author dead as Roland Barthes (1968) famously claimed? Reception history is considerably more conservative in this respect than French post-structuralism, or the superficially similar American pragmatist criticism of Richard Rorty or Stanley Fish. For Fish the author drops almost entirely out of the picture, with the reader taking on a writerly role. In one of his most famous or infamous passages depending on one's view he wrote that "the readers response is not to the meaning, it is the meaning" (Fish 1980 p3). For Jauss the emphasis is on the reader, but there is still a place for the author because the author is part of the horizon to be reconstructed, with biography remaining relevant to this reconstruction.

Situating Jauss within the Historiography of Economics

In the historiographical impasse between traditional and contextual approaches to the history of economics, the high ground among historians of economics is currently occupied by contextual approaches. Traditional histories of economics are still being written, but the authors tend to be either historiographically unaware economists, uninterested in such issues, or else somewhat embarrassed to be still writing for economists using the methods of their forebears. This section situates Jauss reception historiography within this terrain.

Contextualist Historiography

I will first compare Jauss' reception history approach with the linguistic contextualism of Quentin Skinner that has influenced many contextual historians of economics including Donald Winch²¹.

Skinner's (1969) historiographical manifesto was written around the same time as Jauss' inaugural lecture, though they were part of different conversations. Jauss was criticising existing approaches to literary history. Skinner was writing as a historian of political science criticising recent histories of his discipline that ignored the original context of the texts, constructed teleological narratives, or constructed classics expressing timeless ideas. He was also critical of Marxist and Namierian histories where meaning was exhausted by material conditions or interests which could be uncovered from the context of the writing.

Drawing on Collingwood's (1946) philosophy of history, but adding a twist from Austin's speech act theory (1962), Skinner set out his famous rule for contextual interpretation of past

²¹ Skinner (1969) is widely seen as the manifesto of the Cambridge School – for instance Whatmore (2015 p45). James Tully (1988) has assembled Skinner's most important historiographical writings, together with critical essays, and a response by Skinner. There are other varieties of contextual historiography beside that of Skinner and his Cambridge School colleagues JGA Pocock, John Dunn, and Peter Laslett. For instance, Ian Hunter's (2019) restatement and defence of contextualism traces the roots of contextualism to 19th century German philology. It is interesting that Hunter (2019 p185) defines contextualism to include the context of reception: "contextual intellectual history is broadly understood an approach that elucidates the meaning of texts and documents by investigating the circumstances of their composition, uses, and further receptions". However, for the purposes of this paper the Cambridge version is most relevant because of its influence on Donald Winch and other contemporary historians of economics.

texts: “no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a correct description of what he had meant or done... any plausible account of what the agent meant must necessarily fall under, and make use of, the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing. Otherwise the resulting account, however compelling, cannot be an account of his statement or action” (Skinner 1969 p28 and repeated on p49)

According to this rule, meaning can only be recovered by careful study of the linguistic context of the text (“the range of descriptions which the agent himself could at least in principle have applied to describe and classify what he was doing”). This linguistic element of Skinner’s theory connects with Jauss’ horizon expectation of the original readers, for language embodies the shared culture of author and original readers. However, a text is not just words that are part of a linguistic system, but also an act by an author, so to recover meaning we also need to place the text within the context of an argument the author was participating in to see the force of the text (what the author “was doing”). As he wrote: “grasp of force as well as meaning is essential to the understanding of texts” (Skinner 1969 p46). This aspect of Skinner’s rule connects with the longstanding emphasis in textual interpretation on seeking to recover authorial intention²². Skinner, like Jauss, resists the Romantic reliance on empathy to recover intention, emphasising that context is the court of appeal for resolving arguments about intention (Skinner 1969 p49).

Such an approach to texts has implications for how we learn from the past. For Skinner (1969 p50) the history of political thought should not be studied for timeless ideas, or for resolving our questions. The history of political thought is quite distinct from contemporary politics – about which he suggests we need to do our own thinking. The value of history for contemporary politics is indirect - we acquire wisdom and tolerance by exposing ourselves to the struggles of others in other times. Above all, historians of political thought must resist “the vulgar demand for relevance” (from Skinner’s response to critics in Tully 1988 p288).

The leading contextual historian of economics in recent times has undoubtedly been Donald Winch. His attitude to history was shaped by his Princeton PhD supervisor Jacob Viner who was moving towards contextualism, evidenced by his lament about the growing gap between professional economics and what he called scholarship (Viner 1950), various reviews (such as of Schumpeter’s *History of Economic Analysis* Viner 1954), and most clearly in late unpublished lectures at Berkeley and Harvard (Viner 1960, 1962)²³. Winch, fresh from his

²² Charles Taylor commenting on Skinner’s relationship to the tradition of textual interpretation wrote that: “The demand... that we confront our language of explanation with the self-understanding of our subjects, is nothing else but the thesis of hermeneutical theory.” (Taylor 1988 p228). He goes on to argue that Skinner departs from the tradition in privileging the language of the original subjects, and overzealously attempting to avoid passing our own judgements about it. John Keane’s essay on the same volume notes Skinner’s departure from the hermeneutical tradition in ignoring the “productivity” of texts beyond what the author was doing

²³ Winch (1983) reflects on Viner’s historiography and its influence on his own approach. He later commented that Viner made the transition “to intellectual historian long before I encountered him in 1957” (Winch 2009 p3). This is a topic deserving further investigation, though beyond the scope of this paper. Richard Whatmore (2015) and Stefan Collini (2019), perhaps understandably, emphasise the Cambridge school influences on Winch, though Richard Whatmore in personal correspondence acknowledges the importance of Viner for Winch’s historiography. The influences are difficult to separate, and one of the curiosities is that some of Winch’s decisive 1975 sabbatical was spent organising Viner’s papers, including Viner’s late historiographical lectures and abandoned book on economic and religious thought.

PhD and having taught the history of economic thought in Edinburgh, published his own lament about the history of economics (Winch 1962) before moving to the new University of Sussex where his approach evolved in collaboration with colleagues John Burrow and Stefan Collini. The decisive moment for his historiography (see Winch 1983, 2009, Collini 2019) was a 1975 sabbatical at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton where Winch met Quentin Skinner, John Pocock and other contextual historians. This was the sabbatical where he wrote *Adam Smith's Politics* (Winch 1978) which he once described as “puritanically historicist”, reflecting the final stage of his contextual conversion, or at least the acquisition of the philosophical vocabulary to justify his contextual approach to the history of economics. In spite of his eminence, few historians of economics have practised contextualism as rigorously as Winch, nor have followed his path out of the discipline of economics to commune with intellectual historians.

Donald Winch was not prone to extended methodological reflections. There are some in the introduction to his co-authored work on 19th century intellectual history (Collini, Winch and Burrow 1983) where he consciously rejects teleological disciplinary histories, pleads for past authors to be allowed to speak on their own terms, and offers something close to Skinner's rule for contextual interpretation. Methodological reflections pop-up periodically in Winch's later historical work, for instance his unpacking of the metaphor borrowed from John Burrow “eavesdropping on the conversations of the past” (Winch 1996 p28), his typically understated rule that in “achieving historical understanding ... [I am] following a fairly simple rule of thumb: past authors should be treated as one would wish one's own writings and beliefs to be treated, should the positions, by some amazing twist of fate, be reversed” (Winch 1996 p30), to which he adds that he is not advocating exclusive use of his approach to history. There is also his “historiographical sermon” to the European Society for the History of Economic Thought (Winch 2000 p477-9) where his three sermon points are not to give up on intention, to prefer narratives to explanations, and that “eavesdropping on the conversations of the past” is a helpful metaphor for the historian. There are similar methodological remarks in his keynote address to the History of Economic Thought Society of Australia (Winch 2009).

The most important difference between Jauss' reception approach and the contextual historiography of Skinner and Winch is the contextualists comparative lack of self-consciousness about the contemporary historian's own horizon of expectation and absence of formal tools for reconstructing the contemporary horizon of expectation. The contemporary horizon is at best implicit in Skinner's manifesto. Winch's metaphor of eavesdropping at least has the sense of an eavesdropper present in the conversation of the past. He also elaborates that “we are never merely eavesdroppers, anxious only to recapture as faithfully as possible what our interlocutors were saying and how they were doing so. We are engaged in conversations of our own, and we select, edit, and translate according to priorities dictated by our own curiosity and the possible interest and knowledge of those to whom we are speaking. We also possess hindsight and ways of looking and listening that enable us to discern features of the landscape that were not perceived by past interlocutors.” (Winch 1996 p30).

From Jauss point of view Skinner and Winch also appear overconfident about the capacity of the historian to enter completely into past conversations, no matter how closely the original context of the past work is studied. This is a different point to the often-heard charge (related to the knotty philosophical problem of other minds) that the historian can never really know the intentions of the author. Such a charge that intentions cannot be recovered is somewhat

headed off by Skinner's preference for the language of reconstructing what the author was doing rather than the language of recovering authorial intention. Skinner's usual response to criticisms about the impossibility of recovering intention was that he was merely offering contextualism as the most fruitful way of proceeding rather than a technique that guarantees recovery of intentions (see for instance Tully 1988 p279). Winch is more confident about recovering authorial intention, writing that "the difficulties in establishing intention, though by no means negligible, are treated as capable of being surmounted" (Winch 1996 p29). Jauss' point as we have seen was not the in-principle inaccessibility of other minds, but the difficulties the contextual historian faces trying to escape their own horizon, so that the contextual historians encounter with the text in its own horizon will not completely disclose meaning.

Contextual historians are often accused of imprisoning meaning in the past context²⁴. Winch's response – in this case to Samuel Hollander's jibe that the contextual historian "pretends not to know the future" – is that he was only recommending we should not write as if authors had our knowledge of the future and that "in learning 'their' language I do not lose my capacity to speak the one I use with my contemporaries." (Winch 2000 p479). This reiterates his earlier claim that "we can reconstruct what past speakers were trying to express without losing our own capacity to talk about the same subjects in the process." (Winch 1996 p29). The contextualist response that authors have a sense of the future possibilities of text coheres with Jauss insistence on the openness of meaning, though they are much less interested in recovering these future possibilities than reception historians influenced by Jauss.

I suggest that one way of conceptualising the difference between contextual historiography and Jauss historiography is to see reception history as a kind of telescopic contextualism; that is a contextualism restricted not just to one focal length at the original context, but that allows other focal lengths including the context of the contemporary reader, and any other relevant contexts between. An example where these "in-between" focal lengths matter would be a contemporary interpreter trying to understand the way that an early 19th-century figure like Thomas Chalmers received 18th-century texts of Adam Smith. Most importantly the different views produced by adjusting the focal length can be self-consciously and coherently related.

Overall, despite agreement between Jauss and Skinner and Winch on the importance of reconstructing the original context of texts, the espoused methodologies of the contextualists are problematic from Jauss reception history perspective. The problem is the neglect by contextualists of the construction of the contemporary horizon of expectation, or in other words a lack of self-consciousness about their own contemporary context. At a deeper level this reflects the difficulty of integrating the methods of history and economics, with the

²⁴ This criticism that contextual intellectual history fixes meaning in the past was colourfully made by Hayden White, though it should be noted that his criticism predates the flowering of Skinner's and Winch's versions of contextual intellectual history. White (1969 p608) wrote "As historical reading, intellectual history is rather like vicarious sex: neither satisfying nor, ultimately, very helpful as a guide to action. Still, it induces a certain post-coital kind of melancholy. Committed to the notion that consciousness is more interesting than praxis, that the way men conceived their world is as instructive as their actions against it, intellectual history substitutes for the color of the marketplace, the battlefield, and the parliament, the odor of the study, the library, and the academic hall."

contextual historians inadequate integration letting them to prioritise history over economics, and thus readers in history over readers in economics.

However, for both Skinner and Winch it is easier to point to limitations of their methodological pronouncements than their actual historical writing, which seems to lean more in Jauss' direction. Works like Skinner's (1978) account of Reformation and Renaissance political thought, and Winch's account of eighteenth and nineteenth century political economy (1996, 2008) demonstrate the self-consciousness about their own horizon that Jauss calls for, and are widely recognised as excellent receptions of the texts for contemporary readers in spite of Skinner and Winch's earnest disavowals of this intention. Jauss' reception history approach encompasses their actual historical practice even more than their methodological pronouncements.

Traditional Histories of Economic Thought

We now turn to traditional historiography exemplified by George Stigler, Paul Samuelson, Joseph Schumpeter, and Mark Blaug. From Jauss' perspective they share the contextualists lack of self-consciousness about the contemporary location of the historian. However, the problem manifests quite differently - rather than the contextualists underplaying of their contemporary location the traditional historians of economic thought overplay it to the extent that it swamps the original context.

Consider George Stigler's classic account of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reorientation of the theory of distribution (Stigler 1941), an expanded version of his 1938 Chicago PhD thesis supervised by Frank Knight. It opens with his statement that the work is "a critical study of the theories of distribution which rose out of the theory of subjective value, and which were finally systematized into the general marginal productivity theory. The period covered, therefore, lies between 1870 and 1895. It was in this quarter-century that economic theory was transformed from an art, in many respects literary, to a science of growing rigor." (p1). In other words, the perspective is resolutely from the present and admirable scientific status of economics, and the work looks back to see how this came about. Stigler's opening statement is also redolent with teleology "In the nineties the marginal productivity theory finally appeared" (p4) and he is keen to assess logical consistency and empirical validity of assumptions (not fit of the model) in the supposed manner of the contemporary economist (p7).

The same historiography animates Stigler's subsequent essays. Stigler (1952 p207) concluded his assessment of Ricardo: "Measured by the significance of the variables and the manageability of the system, he fashioned what is probably the most impressive of all models in economic analysis. It is here that Ricardo's service to economics lies. His naked logic and pseudologic helped to establish a professional frame of mind which did much to reduce promiscuous fact-gathering and ad hoc theorizing and to incite order and precision." Ricardo's achievement is being assessed from the perspective of the present, with unflinching application of the standards of contemporary professional economics (though with more than a hint of standards Stigler wanted to see, and aspired to in his own work, rather than actually existing standards). Another example of Stigler historiography inspired by his work on Ricardo was his essay on textual exegesis (Stigler 1965) where he distinguished between

“scientific interpretations” of texts arrived at or at least tested by goodness of fit with a sufficiently large sample of passages from the same author, and the lamentable alternative of “personal interpretations” in the sense of investigating what the author really meant. This holds up the contemporary scientific ideal in textual interpretation, though reflecting Stigler’s particular sense of that ideal.

Paul Samuelson, like Stigler was a Nobel prize-winning economist who devoted significant time to the history of economics. His historiography was even more resolutely and explicitly dominated by present economic concerns, usually understood as Samuelsonian economic concerns. For Samuelson (1978) the Classical economists provided an opportunity to apply the techniques of optimization and equilibrium, paring away inessential elements which were not amenable to these techniques. His later historiographical manifesto proposed that “that HET more purposely reorient itself toward studying the past from the standpoint of the present state of economic science. A Whig history of economic analysis” (Samuelson 1987 p52)²⁵.

Joseph Schumpeter was a complicated historian, one who was partly responsible for arousing Samuelson’s interest as a Harvard student in the history of economics, along with earlier classes Samuelson took with Viner at Chicago. Schumpeter was familiar with contextual continental historiographical traditions, yet in his monumental *History of Economic Analysis* pronounced very much in the opposite direction²⁶. He tells the reader at the outset that he is writing a “history of the analytic or scientific aspects of economic thought” (1954 p3) where analysis and science are clearly to be taken in a contemporary sense. Later he explicitly considers the question of context – the question of whether “a writer’s philosophy determines, or is one of the factors which determine, his economics” to which the answer was “I hold that the garb of philosophy is removable also in the case of economics: economic analysis has not been shaped at any time by the philosophical opinions that economists happened to have, though it has frequently been vitiated by their political attitudes.” This statement is to be read with care because it refers to the determination of a writer’s economics, perhaps responding to materialist historiography, but a sense of separation of economic analysis understood in contemporary terms from philosophical and material contexts permeates Schumpeter’s work.

Though as many readers have noticed Schumpeter did not stick very well to his methodological pronouncements and in fact gives the reader a huge amount of information about the philosophical and economic background of the texts he discusses (no doubt part of the reason many readers parted with their money for the book). This contextual material is usually structurally separated by Schumpeter from his discussion of the economic texts, and tends not to be well integrated with the discussion of the economic texts. Even Schumpeter’s discussion in the early part of the book of the sociology of science, preanalytic visions, and a process akin to creative destruction in the history of economics is largely dropped when he turns to the economic texts.

²⁵ The introduction to Medema and Waterman (2014) offers a more complete and nuanced picture of Samuelson as historian of economics than I can here.

²⁶ Schumpeter’s historiography has been much considered in the literature, mostly acutely in my view by Mark Perlman’s 1994 introduction, and Viner’s laudatory but brutal 1954 review of Schumpeter’s work. Peter Groenewegen once described this as a clash between the historiographical temperaments of two of the greatest historians of economics Schumpeter and Viner.

It may be that for all his reading in philosophy and history Schumpeter lacked the historiographical framework and tools to bring together this contextual material, the texts, and his own contemporary perspective on economics. He arguably gets closest to bringing these together in his discussion of natural law and economics in the early modern period, but without complete success, and soon returns to pronouncements about separateness and the measurement rod of present economic analysis. Might he have been helped by Jauss' historiographical framework and tools for reconstructing the original horizon, the horizon of the interpreter, and bringing these to bear together on the text.

Another essentially traditional yet complicated historian was Mark Blaug.²⁷ He began with a PhD thesis on Ricardian economics at Columbia University in 1955 jointly supervised by Stigler and T. W. Hutchison (published as Blaug 1958). It is a rich contextual history of the rise and decline of Ricardian economics in England. Yet Mark Blaug is much better known as the author of *Economic Theory in Retrospect*, where readers of the preface of the 1962 first edition were left in no doubt about his presentist historiography and rigorous disregard of context: "This book is a study of the logical coherence and explanatory value of what has come to be known as orthodox economic theory...My purpose is to teach contemporary economic theory." Later editions soften the pronouncements, and by the 1996 fifth edition the reader of the preface learns that Blaug has revised his previous sharp contrast between relativism and absolutism, that the previously despised "relativism" and praised "absolutism" have become 'historical reconstruction' and "rational reconstruction" and that he "now sees merits in both standpoints" though "if kept distinctly apart.". Yet he cannot resist concluding the book with a barb about contextualism that "good deal of received doctrine is metaphysics" adding there is nothing wrong with this provided is not mistaken for science. (Blaug 1995 p703).

We also see the complexity and movement his historiographical essays. Blaug (1990) demonstrates his awareness of the influential American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty's (1984) discussion of different modes of the history of philosophy²⁸, and he follows Rorty in criticising contextualist historians of ideas confidence in being able to reconstruct meaning: "we can never forget what we now know, so that some version of absolutism is implied in every attempt to examine some text of the past" (Blaug 1990 p28). A later historiographical essay (Blaug 2001 p151) further criticises the practical impossibility of historical reconstruction, in spite of its desirability, balanced by Blaug's observation of the inevitable distortions involved in rationally reconstructing past texts from the point of view of the present. He seems to share something of Jauss view of the dual and complimentary tasks of reconstructing original and contemporary reader horizons, yet seems to lack the philosophical vocabulary to describe the problem and see a way forward.

From the point of view of Jauss' historiography, none of the traditional historians of economic thought offer an adequate account of the contemporary horizon of expectation, and none are sufficiently self-conscious about the contemporary horizon to prevent it swamping their account of the texts.

²⁷ Blaug's historiography is discussed further by Davis (2012)

²⁸ These modes identified by Rorty are: 1. Geistesgeschichte the history of ideas, 2. Historical reconstruction 3. Rational reconstruction and 4. Doxography. All but doxography are legitimate in Rorty's view.

However, just as was the case with our contextual historians Skinner and Winch, masterful traditional historians of economics like Schumpeter and Blaug are closer to Jauss in their actual practice than in their historiographical pronouncements.

Conclusion. Reception History Connects Past and Present Horizons and Breaks the Impasse between Traditional and Contextual Approaches to the History of Economics.

Progress in any field is often triggered by stepping outside the philosophical framework of existing approaches. Quentin Skinner's linguistic contextualism drew on the idealist philosophy of RG Collingwood, supplemented by JL Austin's work on speech acts. Donald Winch shared Viner's distaste for elaborate methodological pronouncement, and both men's historiography developed through practice, though he found in the Cambridge School writings and those of his Sussex colleagues a philosophical language that resonated his practice. Roots of the traditional approaches to the history of economic thought vary with the author. George Stigler picked up a particular view of science that cohered with his polemical agenda within economics. Paul Samuelson was less philosophically self-conscious and more technique driven, but this reflects a particular view of science. Schumpeter was formed in continental historiography, especially Max Weber's methodological essays to which his separation of context and economic analysis owes quite a bit. Mark Blaug's historiography was shaped by his understanding of early 20th century philosophy of science, especially Popper and then Lakatos. Observe the common influence of 20th century philosophy of science on traditional historiography of economics, or at least its influence on the account these authors give of their practice. It is striking how different and changing philosophy of science commitments to positivism, Popper, Kuhn and Lakatos generated a fairly uniform and stable presentist historiography among the traditional historians of economics ²⁹.

This paper moves away from the philosophy of science which has dominated historiographical discussion in economics, and which continues to do so, albeit in a much more sophisticated form than influence the traditional historians of economics that I have discussed. It introduces a perspective from literary studies, with a very different philosophical framework.

My argument is that Jauss' reception history approach has a great deal of potential for historians on economics. Its concept of horizons of expectation is richer than the concept of context. It offers tools for reconstructing horizons and relating them diachronically to each other. There is a place for the synchronic contribution from economic theory. It better connects past and present concerns. This is why it shows a way through the impasse between contextual and traditional approaches to the history of economics.

I have highlighted the aspects of Jauss' reception history approach that I believe would be most useful for historians of economics. The multidimensional nature of the horizon of expectation makes it particularly helpful category for historians of economics who texts that

²⁹ McCloskey (1983 p484) characterized this influence of twentieth century philosophy of sciences as "Modernism" whose "leading idea is that all sure knowledge is modeled on the early 20th century's understanding of certain pieces of 19th-century physics".

have had immense effects on our culture in recent centuries. The emphasis on traditions in reconstructing the horizon expectation seems well suited to our fractious subject.

As well as arguing that reception history is a better framework, I have also argued that it is also a broader framework that encompasses both the contextual and traditional approaches, allowing their advantages to be combined. Jauss extends the contextual approach by insisting on equal care in reconstructing the contemporary context as the original context, and insisting that they be explicitly brought together in act of interpretation of the text. For traditional historians of economic thought Jauss provides a more coherent philosophical grounding of their attention to contemporary economist readers when reading texts. Jauss, though, challenges traditional historians of economic thought to be more reflective about their contemporary location and more disciplined about relating original and contemporary contexts and texts³⁰.

I hope that consideration of Jauss' reception history approach, even if it does result in mass repentance and conversion by contextualists and traditionalists to the gospel of Jauss, may facilitate calmer and better historiographical conversations in our field. Within Jauss' reception history framework neither can be dismissed as illegitimate, and the strengths of each approach can be seen. This encompassing applies to the pronouncements and even more to the practice of the best exponents of contextual and traditional history of economics. It is no accident that Jauss himself was a practising literary historian and his historiographical reflections were provoked by impasse between the methods of literature and history in his own field.

³⁰ Jauss challenge is important for my own project of writing a history of economic thinking in the Christian tradition for Harvard University Press. Consider an economically relevant biblical text like II Corinthians 8-9. I have to pay equal attention to reconstructing the original first century horizon of expectation and the contemporary horizon of expectation, and most of all to bring these to bear on my account of the meaning of the text. The contemporary horizon is one where individualism and contract have become much more important than community and gift, and where the church is viewed as a voluntary organisation which individuals in a secular society join or otherwise depending on the balance of costs and benefits. A more explicitly economic text such as Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is in some ways even more challenging because of the intense ideological overlay in the contemporary horizon - it is not just a matter of what Donald Winch and other Smith scholars have done so well so well in recent years of reconstructing the original eighteenth century horizon.

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