THE SOFIA UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE

announces a

CALL FOR PAPERS

for the sixth in a series of international interdisciplinary conferences on the cultural history of contemporaneity. The subject of the conference is:

CONTEXT AND CONTEXTUALIZATIONS

The conference is open to young and established scholars from Sofia University and elsewhere, as well as to people working in the sphere of culture and the arts. Papers on general topics within the thematic area of the conference are welcome, along with analyses and presentations of social case studies, specific research hypotheses, processes in philosophy, science and the arts, and art projects and works.

The conference will open on 6 December 2016 with a session at Sofia University, and continue on 7, 8, 9 and 10 December at the Centre Hotel in the Apriltsi resort (near Troyan). The official languages will be Bulgarian and English.

Application deadline: 15 October 2016

Applications, including the title of the paper, a 300-word abstract and a short bibliography, should be submitted electronically to conference.cultcentersu@gmail.com.

Expenses of participants from Sofia University (for travel, meals and accommodation) will be covered by the organizers. External participants are expected to cover their own expenses.

THEMATIC AREA OF THE CONFERENCE

The term “context” is inherently paradoxical: it is both clarifying and unclear.

It is clarifying because no real social and historical problem can be understood or explained without careful contextualization: without considering it in the concretely-relevant historical milieu of relations, real ties, possibilities, dangers, risks, stimuli, stakes, motives for actions, etc., valid at the given point in time. If it is true that the facts from the past resemble frozen answers to unknown questions (as R. G. Collingwood puts it), then one has to reconstruct this “questionability” – that is, the complex web of circumstances, relevant data, meanings, etc. – in order to have access to the unknown web of problems that the people from the past were forced to confront. Without the reconstruction of this unique context, no social-historical fact could be elucidated.

*The price per night at the Centre Hotel is BGN 30 per person in shared double room; BGN 46 for single room. Upon advance request, external participants are welcome to attend conference meals for BGN 20 per day. For reservations please contact the organizational team.
But that is exactly why the term “context” is in itself problematic: for the Unique, no theory is possible. If every context is unique and individual, then it seems there is no methodological way of specifying, controlling and clarifying its terminological meaning: the very term “context” turns out to be always contextual, variable and flexible – and therefore ceases to be a concept.

Doesn’t this doom the word “context” to remain forever a tactical device, a non-theoretical tool and metaphor of practical intuition? It is difficult to imagine any disciplined, analytical procedure that can consistently define and specify its meaning, maintain its unambiguous meanings, give it terminological status and define its legitimate scientific usages. Hence, every attempt to theorize the term would seem doomed to fail: after all, wouldn’t every theory of context be “out of context” in principle, claiming universal, extra-contextual validity and thereby denying what it itself defines and clarifies?

In short, the paradox looks as follows: (1) every act of theorization without contextualization is an abstract, vain pursuit; (2) in its turn, every contextualization seems doomed to be something non-theoretical: a matter of intuition acquired through scholarly experience; it remains always just partially reflected-upon background knowledge based on the practical work with data, documents and archives. In other words, it is doomed to remain an individual techne of each individual historian that is, apparently, beyond the possibility of terminological articulation, reproducibility and repeatable verification, which are essential to every modern science.

How are we to deal with this paradox: what are we to do with this scientifically unscientific “term”, is it necessary at all, can it be modified in a scientific way? Could it be that the term is preserved at the formal level, while its content changes with every new context? Or every new context changes its very form, its logical content and scope?

And on the other hand, how could we make do without this “term”? “Context” is an irreplaceable tool, proved daily in the practices of normalized science. Should it be declared to be a limit of every universalizing theoretical knowledge in the field of history?

This conference invites contributions that attempt to theorize, historicize and contextualize the term “context”. But it also welcomes papers and presentations that do not have theoretical aims, seeking instead to demonstrate the very “techne” of contextualization – the careful work with the webs of historical facts, agents, motives, problems, perspectives. Perhaps the juxtaposition of those two approaches will give rise to new ideas.

Here are some possible questions and lines of enquiry:

**THEORETICAL SECTION**

- Is an integral theory of context possible?
- Are there theoretical aporias related to the term “context”?
- How is knowledge of context imagined, and how is it attained practically? Is “objective” knowledge of the context/contexts possible, or does it always depend on the perspective of the chosen research problem? What is the role of analysis, generalizations, the search for general patterns, and what is the role of practical intuition, wisdom, and intellectual experience?
- Is it possible to speak of universal and situational contexts, and are there truly universal, determining contexts? Could globalization become a context, or is context always local? Doesn’t every local problem actualize new relevant contextual relationships, unlocking its “own contexts”? If we say that context is always local, isn’t this a tautology? How do contexts intertwine?
• Contemporary relationship between fundamental philosophical approaches: universalism, scepticism, relativism, contextualism.
• Contexts, theories, and hierarchies of knowledge. Are researchers from the peripheries by default merely providers of context to the grand theorists from “the centre”? How are the scholarly roles of collectors, analysts, theorists distributed?
• The relativizing role of contexts with regard to morality and politics. Doesn’t historical context make moral universalism impossible and justify solely Realpolitik? What is the role of context in contemporary moral philosophy?
• How does context give rise to “anti-context”: how is something separated and differentiated from the context? How does it become autonomous and emancipated from the web of relationships that has made it possible – becoming something else, an Event?
• Are narratives still a privileged form of representing context? How do we narrate today, how will we narrate in the future? Are other, non-narrative techniques of representing contexts possible?

HISTORICO-THEORETICAL SECTION

• Upon what cultural and historical, technical and practical conditions does “context” begin to be spoken of?
• The term “context” as a derivative of cultural and communicative situations of “lost context” that are related to print culture, telecommunications culture, digital culture.
• Is the term “context” interpreted in the same way when referring to print, electronic, digital, and other such communicative contexts? Is it related to “spatial order”, and what happens with it when this spatial order is de-actualized (Virilio)? Examples of theorizations on the term “context” from various sciences: historiography, cultural history, anthropology, sociology, but also logic, pragmatics, computer sciences, cognitive science, etc.

PRACTICAL CONTEXTUALIZATIONS PRACTICED BY THE SOCIAL AND HUMAN SCIENCES

Here we invite papers that give examples (to present case studies) of heuristic and in-depth contextualizations – historical, anthropological, art-historical, sociological, etc.

THE PRESENT-DAY CONTEXT

• “Context today”: what is it, what do we refer to as “here and now”? How are we to describe the context we are living in today, how can it be identified and understood? What are its social, political, military, economic, philosophical, natural, and cultural forms and relationships, its boundaries? Is it possible to speak of an “integral contemporary context”, or does it break down into separate systems of relevances and plays of perspectives?
• Which are the main determinants of the relevant context today? Is it identical to the technological environment we are immersed in, and is this environment a new,
transformed Enlightenment in which instead of enlightening people we will be enlightening machines?
- What has happened, and what is happening, with the “space-” and “posthuman” era? Is this our widest possible context? Do “eras”, “epochs”, “periods” and other such periodization terms bring us closer to the problem in question?
- How are we to treat what some call “mixed reality” – the amalgam of virtual reality, augmented reality, and physical reality? What is this new context, and what are its cultural and political implications?
- Is a new universalism possible today? What happened with “the end” and “the suspicion” of “Grand Narratives”? What could be the vehicle of a new “universal and shared” context, a shared “here and now”?
- Are we living in a new political situation (beyond left and right), new political contexts – in relation to terrorism as well as in relation to the expected “mass migrations” or environmental changes?

THE BULGARIAN CONTEXT

- Is it possible to speak of a national context today and to avoid the spectre of methodological nationalism?
- What is the horizon of contemporary Bulgarian culture and publicity? To what extent are there universal problems and contextual solutions, or contextual problems and universal solutions in it?
- What could be referred to as “local knowledge” in Bulgaria?
- Do we have to transform “our contextual” into a universal contextual, and how is this actually done?
- Is there an intra-national cultural blindness between groups, ethnic communities, religious communities, subcultures, and the relevant contexts through which they reflect themselves, self-identify, and act? How (and do) the different social communities and networks form a common context? What does “our own context” actually mean?