On Passionate Reason: Controversy and the Making and Revising of Context (with Darrin Hicks)

Ronald W Greene, University of Minnesota - Twin Cities
ON PASSIONATE REASON: CONTROVERSY AND THE MAKING AND REVISING OF CONTEXT

Ronald Walter Greene, University of Illinois, Urbana; and Darrin Hicks, University of Denver

In this essay we offer an account of the complex relationship between context and controversy. The impetus for this project is a desire to theorize the conditions for the possibility of radical democratic practices. That is the weakening of rigid divisions between genders, classes, races, social roles and ranks, communities, and nations by freeing us from the constraints of prewritten scripts and irrevisable contexts. Historically, argumentation studies has posited the practice of reason-giving as a condition of democratic practice. Recently, Goodnight has suggested that we redirect our critical consciousness beyond reason-giving and toward the cultivation and preservation of the oppositional spaces present in controversy. From this new theoretical vantage point what was once seen as the exchange of reasons is now seen as the interaction between context and controversy.

Any offered argument invites objections. Objections may proceed along the lines of conventional opposition by granting a shared context and common rules for debates, thus tacitly affirming routine communication. Objections may also call into question the speech acts that forward an argument, however. So, controversy may arise at critical junctures and put up for discussion rules and presumptions on who gets to talk, what counts as proof, whose language is authoritative, what reasons are recognized, which grounds are determinative, along which lines contexts are invoked, and whether penalties should be attached to making objections. Such controversy is no mere failure of agreement, rather it is an achievement of sustained and mindful opposition.

In this passage Goodnight describes two types of argumentative interactions. In the first, context determines the grounds upon which controversy can be established. In the second, controversies open a context up to revision by clearing a space for the establishment of new forms of practice. This account, an evocative description of the experience of arguing, leaves the following questions unanswered: What is a context? How do contexts determine our routine practices? How do social actors come to consent to the norms of a context? What are the grounds of a controversy? And, how do we move from routine communication practices to context transforming controversy? This paper steps back and attempts to map the theoretical space opened by these questions.

Contexts are the institutional arrangements and imaginative preconceptions brought to life in and through the methodical ways in which social actors produce, recognize, and make accountable their practical actions. There are at least four distinguishable vectors of social life constituting a context: first, the consolidation of an organizational and technological style of economic activity; second, a set of social roles and ranks corresponding to the relative access of competing groups to governmental power; third, a process of identity formation alongside authoritative models of human association; and fourth, the procedures used to regulate communicative interactions. Though these vectors are often treated independently, it is in their intersection that social life achieves its rich contour. A context is a map of the detailed organization of daily life. Each vector of a context is organized around practices that have local, regional, national, and global trajectories. Hence, the practices which structure a context can be analyzed in and through their effects regarding the local, regional, national, and global spaces in which people live their daily lives.

Contexts have histories, they are not natural, though they are often experienced as if they were natural. The history of a context is a history marked by moments of intense controversy over the "terms of our practical and passionate attachments and all of the resources and assumptions that may influence these terms." This controversy is fought against the background of prior arrangements and preconceptions that shape the controversy without fully determining its outcome.

These moments of controversy are interrupted and contained through the articulation of heterogeneous practices. By an articulation of practices we mean the ways in which different practices or different elements within the same practice can be stitched together to re-structure the material and representational contradictions which serve as the grounds for a controversy. A context can be read as an articulation of practices which create, maintain, and/or transform one or more controversies which have the potential to re-structure our practical and passionate attachments. Our practical and passionate attachments are constituted by the conflict over contested and contradictory practices which attempt to arrange, distribute and differentiate the positions from which people can experience the world. These positions define the places from which we can speak, what we can say, where and how we can live, and the means and opportunities of empowerment. The material and psychic re-arrangement of the context creates a stratified human geography that enables and constrains the present and future maneuverability of social actors.

As a structured space, a context normalizes the rules, rationalities and practices of social actors. This process of
normalization is not so much a repressive power as it is a positivity which produces the institutional spaces in which social actors may perform certain operations on their own bodies, conduct, thoughts, and ways of life directed toward improving the quality of their existence. Foucault expresses the positivity of power in the following way: *power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized.* Context stabilization is achieved in and through the structuration of these "fields of possibility" in ways that naturalize and internalize a particular articulation of practices. The question remains—how is it that social actors come to normalize the rules, rationalities and practices of a context?

One standard answer to this question is to advance a theory of false consciousness. That is to say, social actors are manipulated to do and want things that they do not need. This answer fails to offer a description of why social actors, particularly those who are disadvantaged by a particular contextual geography, invest so much energy into the routine procedures of daily life. To suggest that the commitments of social actors to particular rules, rationalities and/or practices is a form of false consciousness is to suggest that we are, in less than delicate language, "judgmental dopes". As a theory of normalization, false consciousness contributes to an analytical elitism. This analytical elitism may serve to reproduce the theoretical categories of a form of ideological critique, but it fails to serve as a thick description of the context in which social actors live their lives. As Said suggests, a "critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations which it is in conflict." We believe that the answer to the question of how people learn to normalize the rules, rationalities and practices of a context requires a retheorization of passion.

The prevailing conceptions of passion in modern western thought revolve around two contrasting images. In one case, passion is viewed as an uncontrollable outbreak of emotion that forces one to disobey the dictates of reason. In the other case, passion is seen as the source of an emotional detachment, a poignant alienation, from social convention. In both cases, the paradigmatic reality lies outside of passion and is located in either reason or social convention. Hence, the positivistic assumption that a detached, disinterested, dispassionate purchase is necessary to give an accurate description of the world. While the critiques of positivism abound, argumentation studies lack a critical vocabulary for discussing the central role of passion in organizing our daily lives. An alternative account would begin by placing passion in the larger field of affect.

Affect describes the process of articulation by which people create bonds of identification and belonging to different context(s). According to Grossberg, "affect identifies the strength of the investment which anchors people in particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings and pleasures . . . it also determines how invigorated people feel at any moment of their lives, their level of energy or passion." An investment marks the degree of intensity in which particular places can matter to people. It explains how and how much people care about particular practices, meanings, rationalities, and pleasures. Grossberg borrows the concept of a "mattering map" to describe how our affective investments are structured. Mattering maps "tell people where, how and with what intensities they can become absorbed — into the world and into their lives.* Mattering maps contribute to the internalization and naturalization of those social practices constituting a context because social actors get something out of those practices. That is to say, the affective investment produces a return on the investment. This explains why social actors are not judgmental dopes. Our mattering maps offer us an identity, a way of caring about the world, a sense of belonging. They help to give the positions in which we experience the world a texture and coherence. They offer us a mechanism by which we can understand the world and our place in the world. Consequently, we have a stake in the practices which articulate a context.

A controversy (described by Goodnight as a "place") can be understood as a potential site of investment where our affective resources are deployed, lived, experienced; articulated and rearticulated in an attempt to negotiate the contradictions in our social practices. A contradiction refers to a process whereby a particular social practice generates conditions which block or threaten its own reproduction. The ways in which social actors respond to these contradictions structure the possibilities for context transformation. A contradiction can emerge in a number of ways. First, a contradiction emerges when the affective investments in a particular practice are negated by that practice. In other words, the practice begins to obstruct the reproduction of identity and belonging. Second, a contradiction emerges when one practice begins to negate those forms of identity and belonging structured by another practice. In other words, the reproduction of one practice runs up against conditions necessary for the reproduction of a contiguous practice. Recall that the social practices of a context produce the places and positions in which people experience the world. These positions are not simply passive containers of particular practices but are also active sites for resisting, reproducing and transforming practices. Thus, a third way in which a contradiction may emerge is in the relationship between the lived places of a context and the ways in which those places attempt to capture and re-organize particular practices. Finally, since each social practice has different trajectories — the local, regional, national, and global — the reproduction of a social practice may be blocked or threatened at any point in this trajectory.

At this point, we can begin to theorize the relationship between controversies, contradictions and contexts. Contradictions problematize our affective investments in particular social practices when they begin to block or threaten the return on our investment. A controversy has the potential of opening the space of a context in and through the re-articulation of our practical and passionate attachments. In other words, this space clearing gesture destabilizes our mattering maps so that we might be able to imagine new ways of organizing our context. Controversies become those places in which the structure of our affective investments (our mattering maps) are reproduced, deployed,
articulated and re-articulated in order to create, maintain, and/or transform the contradictions in our social practices. There are no guarantees that a controversy will transform a context. The contradictions which energize the controversy may be displaced or simply ignored. People live with contradictions everyday. Nor is there any guarantee that our transformed context will produce a more democratic human geography. Our affective investments can be re-structured in ways that deny people spaces and places from which to organize their lives. However, the importance of theorizing a controversy as a site which articulates and rearticulates our affective investments is to recognize that "the determining moment is often the history of struggle within and over the affective plane. For it is in their affective lives that people constantly struggle to care about something, and to find the energy to survive, to find the passion necessary to imagine and enact their own projects and possibilities."  

**ENDNOTES**


6The critical concept of an articulation was first used by Gramsci. Currently there are a number of different theoretical traditions which have appropriated the concept. We follow in the trajectory marked by British Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall describes an articulation as "a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not 'eternal' but has constantly to be renewed, which can under certain circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections—rearticulations—being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices mean that they become identical or that the one is dissolved into the other. Each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence. However, once an articulation is made, the two practices can function together, not as an 'immediate unity'... but as 'distinctions within a unity.'"


9We borrow this phrase from Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology.*


12*We Gotta Get Out Of This Place,* 82.


14Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place,* 83.