

Conceptual Way to Understand the Political Science

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Abstract: *Every science has the concept to define its terms, similarly concepts is essential to the enterprise of political science. If It fail to develop clear and precise concepts, our theoretical insights and empirical discoveries will fail to be clear and precise, too. This paper deals major pitfalls for conceptual analysis as well as the fundamental challenges to concept and conceptual innovation in the study of politics.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Without solid conceptual foundations, the edifice of political science is insecure. If It fail to develop clear and precise concepts, our theoretical insights and empirical discoveries will fail to be clear and precise, too. This entry reviews major pitfalls for conceptual analysis as well as the fundamental challenges to concept formation and conceptual innovation in the study of politics. In contemporary political science, concept formation is often regarded as a distraction, a mere prelude to serious research that is given scarce attention. Scholars sometimes ignore conceptual disputes, resolve them by fiat, or delegate their resolution to political philosophers.

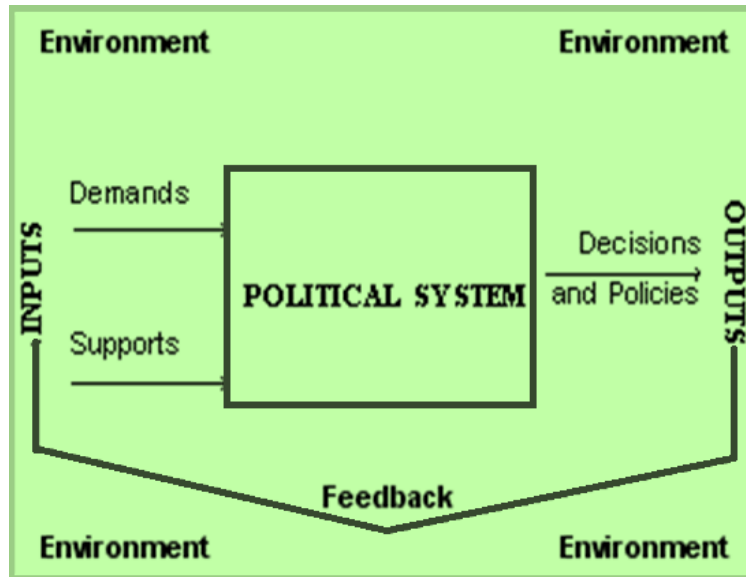


At the same time, a strong tradition of self-conscious and systematic concept analysis. The following contents offer an analytical synthesis that weaves together insights of conceptual debate in both philosophy and political science.

II. FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT

Its origins in ancient Greece, Western philosophy has been debating the nature and meaning of concepts. For centuries, thinkers tried to resolve one fundamental problem: the relation between the world and the mind, the objective and the subjective, things and ideas. They conceived the mind as a mirror and concepts as mental images of the outside world, as cognitive representations of objective realities that uphold the fragile correspondence between the two worlds. In the mid-twentieth century, the so-called “linguistic turn” in modern

philosophy, brought about by authors like (the late) Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin, redefined the basic coordinates of concept analysis. It shifted the axis of conceptual debate from cognition to language and from language as a system of representative symbols (“Platonism”) to language as a medium of social action. According to the classic conception of language, concepts are our basic units of thought. According to a pragmatic understanding of language, concepts are our basic units of (linguistic) action. In this perspective, concepts are not interior images that correspond to external realities, but practical tools that allow us to do many things, many more than just putting vivid labels on inanimate objects. They allow us to threaten and promise, to bless and condemn, giving orders and request favours, to express tenderness and anger, to know and believe, to contract marriage and baptizing ships, etcetera. Designating objects “out there” in the external world is just one linguistic function among innumerable others.



As practitioners of social science, too, It do more than offer aseptic statements about the world. In our texts and speeches, It do more than describe and explain, more than refer to facts and associations between facts. It laud and criticize colleagues, highlight and downplay themes, support and refute arguments, persuade and dissuade readers, and so forth.

III. MEANING OF A CONCEPT

If concepts are means of action, their meaning does not derive from their correspondence to objective realities, but from their practical roles in linguistic communication. In Wittgenstein’s famous dictum: “The meaning of a word is its use in the language”. Language is a medium of social communication. Its rules of usage and meaning are public, not private. Our shared knowledge about the meaning of a word derives from our shared linguistic practices. As competent language users It know what others know about the meaning (the conditions of legitimate use) of a concept. As responsible language users It accept the meaning of a concept (its conditions of legitimate use) when It use it and accept that others can hold us to account for using it. As in other realms of social action, responsibility means that It accept the consequences of our deeds. Take the standard example of a promise. If I promise you x, I understand the meaning of promise making and accept its conditions of validity. Among other things, I understand and accept that x is a future action that benefits you, that I am able to perform it, that my promise obliges me to perform it, and that I actually intend to perform it. If I promise, yet violate any of these conditions of validity that constitute the meaning of promises and in consequence fail to carry out x, you can hold me accountable. When It employ concepts, more specifically, as means of propositions (the primary form of speech acts in the social sciences), It use them as carriers of general claims about the empirical phenomena they are referring to. When applying them to concrete cases, It subscribe to these claims. It commit ourselves to their truth (applicability). If I call a man a friend, a thief, or a left-wing dictator, I articulate (and thus embrace) certain (contextually understood) claims about my relationship to him, his relationship to alien property, or the form and substance of his exercise of state power. In case of doubt, confusion, or contestation, I must be ready to justify my conceptual choices and accept the consequences. The bundles of claims It commit ourselves to when employing a concept comprises its meaning. Often these claims and commitments remain implicit. Formal definitions serve to make them explicit.

punctual and are an hour late. In the social sciences, It run higher systemic risks of breaking through the thin ice of implicit understandings. Our key concepts are often complex and contested, and It cannot take for granted that others comprehend them in the same manner as It do. Linguistic transparency is, therefore, our first obligation in the social scientific use of concepts. Karl Marx remarked once that he needed three volumes to explain the concept of capital. It need not go that far in explicating the core concepts It use in our research. Concise formal definitions will often suffice. Yet, if It fail to make explicit our central conceptual commitments, our theories and findings cannot contribute to the construction of common knowledge, only to the accumulation of fragmentary statements whose interrelations are uncertain. Conceptual opacity engenders opaque research.

VI. CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION

As the descendants of Noah in ancient Babylonia set out to build a pre-modern skyscraper (“a tower, whose top, may reach unto heaven”), God, alarmed by their capacity of monolingual coordination, intervened to “confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech”. More than anything else, the concept analytical tradition of Giovanni Satori has been concerned about conceptual confusion. According to its disciplinary diagnosis, the builders of comparative political science are afflicted by a similar confusion of tongues as the architects of the tower of Babel. Lacking discipline and coherence, schools and scholars are speaking past each other in different, mutually incomprehensible vocabularies.

If concepts form triangles of terms, meanings, and referents, conceptual confusion may arise from three sources: confusing relations between terms and meanings (ambiguity), confusing relations between meanings and referents (vagueness), and confusing stipulations of meaning.

VII. CONCEPT FORMATION

Concept formation is the systematic development and explication of the core claims It commit ourselves to when applying a concept. It requires us to understand ordinary and specialized uses of the concept, to map its location within its semantic field, to situate it within empirical realities and analytical frames, to understand its structural properties, to choose our semantic commitments, and to choose the term that best resonates with its meaning.

VIII. CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES

The strength of our commitments to the conceptual claims It articulate varies by degrees. Some claims It hold to be indispensable across contexts. They constitute the core meaning of a concept. Other claims It deem to be secondary and contingent. They form the peripheral and contextual connotations of a concept. According to the classical approach to concept analysis, from Aristotle to Sartori, if It wish to comprehend a concept, It need to identify the former, its semantic core. In the face of multiple uses of a concept, the semantic core is located at the intersecting area of those claims competent concept users declare to be binding (“necessary and sufficient”). Staking out a common ground of binding conceptual commitments (“the core concept”) often allows us to distinguish “narrow”, “thin”, or “minimal” definitions (that limit themselves to the core) from “broad”, “thick”, or even “maximal” ones (that go beyond, up to envisioning ideal-typical instances of the concept).

According to the classical conception of concepts, if different uses of a term do not share common semantic ground, they do not count as instances of the same concept. They appear as instances of multiple concepts. Modern philosophers of language (reinforced by more recent psychological research on typicality effects) have shed doubt on the notion that our ordinary usage of concepts is governed by the strict membership rules of necessary and sufficient conditions. They have contested the notion that concepts carry semantic cores. Rather than committing themselves to a fixed set of indispensable claims, they have suggested that concept users often commit themselves to a more open set of mutually substitutable claims. Ludwig

Wittgenstein introduced the idea of family resemblances to describe concepts that are defined by an ensemble of alternative attributes, rather than sharing a core of necessary attributes. More recently, David Collier and James Mahon have talked of “radial” categories. In set theoretic terms, the relevant features of family resemblance or radial concepts do not form intersections, but unions.

It seems indeed to be the case that ordinary language users routinely apply empirical concepts, such as fruit and furniture, to concrete objects on the basis of their closeness to typical examples (“prototypes”). These intuitive applications are not based on invariable set of claims all competent language users subscribe to. However, the use of family resemblance seems less frequent (and less compelling) in the social sciences. When students of politics use the notion of family resemblance, they commonly apply it not to the highest level of abstraction (the definition of general properties of a concept), but to lower levels of abstraction (the definition of constitutive dimensions or the observation of concrete instances of a concept). Concepts described as family resemblances often do seem to share an abstract semantic core (at a high level of generality), even if either their constitutive dimensions or their observational indicators are mutually substitutive.

As a matter of fact, the observation of “family resemblances” seems to be generally dependent on the prior comprehension (at least vaguely and implicitly) of an abstract semantic core. It is only because It possess a general notion of their common nature that It can discern the elastic observational resemblance of certain classes of cases. Otherwise It would perceive no more than superficial similarities among disjointed phenomena.

Arguably, this is even true for the two paradigmatic concepts of “families” and “games” Wittgenstein derived his notion of family resemblances from. Consider families. The sociological literature offers numerous overlapping definitions of families and subtypes of families. For instance, the modern

IX. NEW CONCEPTS

When It wish to draw distinctions It had not drawn before, or when It wish to grasp commonalities It had not grasped before. Sometimes It wish to seize new empirical phenomena, sometimes to adopt new perspectives on old phenomena. In the study of politics, It are continually confronted with novel realities; continually It are trying to see together what political actors tend to look at in isolation; and continually It are developing theories that redefine the relevant boundaries of the political world. Hence our incessant demand for conceptual creativity.

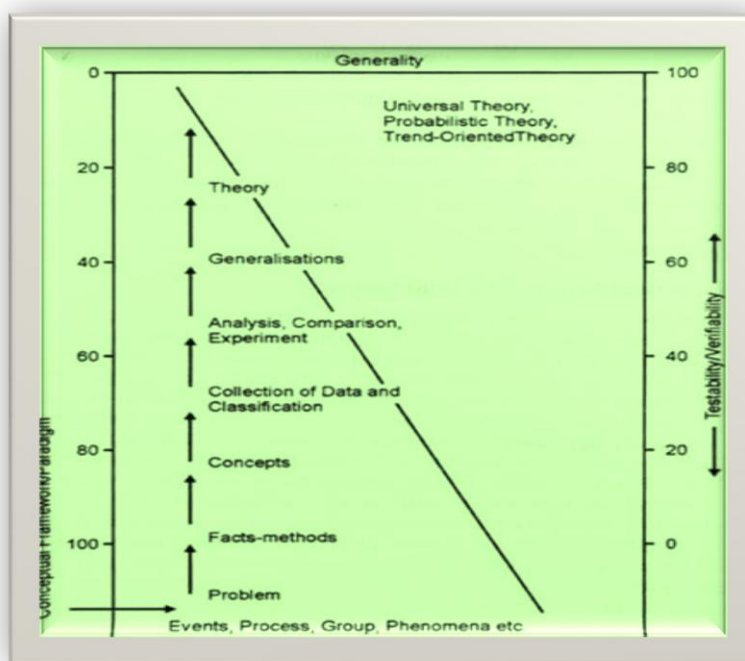
Like the political realities they try to capture and the political theories they strive to express, new concepts seldom emerge de novo, as radical breaks with the past. More often than not, scholars introduce new concepts by modifying old ones. The repertoire of incremental conceptual innovation is broad. Authors may craft new concepts by (a) redefining the substantive meaning of a given concept, (b) importing concepts from other languages or scientific disciplines, (c) remodelling the ladder of abstraction by adding new distinctions or removing established ones, (d) introducing diminished or enhanced subtypes, or (e) changing the property space of a concept (by altering the distance between conceptual poles, shifting their location, or introducing intermediate categories).

When It have reviewed the various uses of a concept and its semantic neighbours, when It have understood the configuration of conceptual claims others accept as binding and chosen those It do, It sometimes face the task of “selecting the term that designates the concept”. Sometimes, not always. Sometimes, It have terminological choices, sometimes It have not.

The names of grand concepts in political science, like justice, power, and rationality, the terms It use to designate them (and have used to designate them for years, decades, or even centuries), are given and fixed at present.

Scholars often disagree about the precise meaning they associate with certain concepts designated by certain terms. They embrace contending “conceptions” of the concepts under dispute. The tight coupling between terms and concepts, however, prevents their semantic disagreements from spilling over into terminological disagreements. Switching the term under discussion would involve switching the concept under discussion. Authors who discuss, for instance, the concepts of justice, power, and rationality either discuss these concepts under these names, or they discuss something else. If they move even to neighbouring terms, like fairness, authority, and intelligence, they move into different (albeit contiguous) conceptual terrains.

When terms and concepts are welded together through strong bonds of semantic history, when the former “represent” the latter without equivalent substitutes, terminological choices precede semantic debates. By choosing a term, It bring the concept it stands for into focus, which then allows us to partake in on-going disputes about disputed aspects of its meaning.



When concepts are less deeply anchored in history and theory, the sequence can be inverted. It can first determine the substantive claims it is interested in and then settle upon appropriate names, either by selecting among available terms or by crafting new ones. If it articulate our conceptual claims in a precise manner, it put ourselves in a position of selecting the precise terms whose connotations correspond most closely to the substance of our concept. Semantic fields that are densely populated with near synonyms of similar standing (with none of them dominating all others) offer most latitude for fine-tuning our terminological choices. For instance, if it study the “consolidation” of political regimes, it may choose alternative terms that lie in its semantic vicinity, yet emphasize diverging substantive concerns. If it wish to stress the duration of regimes over time, it may talk about continuity, endurance, or persistence. If it wish to stress their ability to weather systemic crises, it may talk about resilience, viability, or sustainability. If it wish to stress the process character of consolidation, it may talk about stabilization, institutionalization, or entrenchment.

While refined concepts ask for refined vocabularies, new concepts demand new terms. Whenever the diffusion of new theories (like game theory) or the emergence of new realities (like electoral autocracies) induces waves of conceptual creativity, they are accompanied by waves of terminological innovation. The rise of game theory has brought a whole new vocabulary into political science that includes notions like backward induction, bounded rationality, perfect equilibrium, incomplete information, cooperative games, focal points, mixed strategies, etcetera. The rise of electoral authoritarian regimes since the end of the Cold War has led comparative scholars to propose a broad assortment of labels designed to capture these novel political systems, such as hybrid regimes, semi-authoritarian regimes, inconsistent regimes, multiparty autocracies, competitive authoritarianism, and institutionalized dictatorship. Overall, driven by changing theories as well as changing realities, terminological innovation is a pervasive phenomenon in political science.

X. CONCLUSION

If it learn to incorporate conceptual self-awareness into our canon of methodological sophistication, it will do better theory and better research. It may not reach the impossible ideal of a fully transparent, clear, and precise technical language and as a scientific community it may be too diverse and competitive to build another tower of Babel. It will put the edifice of political science on more solid foundations.

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