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A Spark for the Political Imagination

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Fred Schaffer's deceptively slim volume on interpretive methodologies and conceptual analysis is a gem. It is exceptionally well written and concise, packed with interesting and wide-ranging examples from a variety of disciplines, historical and geographic spaces. Schaffer develops *elucidation* as an approach to apprehending social phenomena and contrasts it with positivist approaches (in particular, the idea of *concept formation*). Schaffer argues that rather than attempting to objectively contain a concept with positivist approaches to concept classification, we are better served by elucidating concepts. His elucidation techniques allow us to see the "meaning and use of concepts in lived practices" and to avoid precise but unrealistic, un-lived concepts.¹

The discussion of these distinctions in the text is refreshingly easy to grasp and jam-packed with excellent examples. Through these examples, Schaffer offers a set of methodological tools for "grounding, locating and exposing" data that help us interpret everyday, taken-for-granted concepts. For these

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¹ Schaffer 2016, 7.

reasons, the book would be a great addition to any graduate studies curriculum in the social sciences, and faculty should immediately update their syllabi. But with this volume, Schaffer's real contribution is the stimulating deployment of language, example and imagery to initiate a process of political imagination that is quite needed in political days such as these we face. In this way, Schaffer expands our classrooms and compels us to apply our new methodological tools to much larger arenas. Both students and scholars could benefit from such inspiration.

Through elucidation, and the techniques he develops, Schaffer helps interpretivists use their conceptual tools to examine social science concepts themselves, particularly those associated with power. For him, the task of elucidation is to "investigate the ways in which the social world is built up linguistically and the ways in which social actors deploy concepts to pursue their goals."² As such, Schaffer's guide to elucidating concepts could be a helpful tool (or toolbox) for scholars and policy-makers working in complex and real-time political contexts and on pressing political problems.

While much of our research addresses long-term processes, political scientists and other social scientists are well positioned to contribute to the public discourse on important contemporary issues such as national and local elections, race and gender issues and political protest, to mention just a few. Some, maybe even many of us, see this as an important extension of our civic and ethical engagement with our fields of study, as well as our teaching. We may appear on *The News Hour* or *NPR* or *Fox News*, we increasingly Tweet or make statements for *The New York Times*; we write for *Foreign Affairs*, contribute to roundtables and policy reports for major think tanks and collaborate with government and policy-making bodies. This is crucial to giving our research findings the relevance and exposure they deserve and, particularly for qualitativists and interpretivists, an opportunity to contribute our methodological and epistemological insights to wide political debate.

So what can interpretivist tools such as elucidation bring to the task of public meaning-making in contemporary political life? I will use an example from my own experience to demonstrate the imaginative spark that was generated by reading Schaffer's elucidation techniques. At the 2016 Rio Olympics, many outsiders were introduced for the first time to the movement broadly called the #Ethiopianprotests, or more specifically the #Oromoprotests, when the silver medalist marathon runner from Ethiopia, Feyisa Lilesa, crossed the finish line with his arms raised in an X above his head in symbolic protest.³ Scholars of Ethiopia, myself included, Ethiopians at home and in the diaspora, had been following the protests closely for some time, but were surprised to see Lilesa's powerful use of the protest symbol on the global stage. The International Olympic Committee and news media outlets attempted to explain the gesture, the context behind it, and the potential conflict with IOC rules on the politicization of the Olympics, and broader

debates were raised regarding the role of foreign aid in Ethiopia.

So here was my dilemma. Like Schaffer, I have an interpretive interest in how people use and understand words and concepts like *democracy*, *freedom*, and *protest*. How would these protests be interpreted? How do the participants themselves understand these protests? I do not assume that Ethiopians use or understand these words in ways that are always similar to how these words are used and understood by the media or the foreign policy and donor community in my home city of Washington, DC. For instance, the ruling regime, the EPRDF, has a very specific notion of what they describe as "revolutionary democracy" and their role as the "developmental state" that is distinct and fairly well articulated. The EPRDF today touts "freedom" as "development," generally understood as economic development. At some level, the message of the protests, though less clear, could be heard as a repudiation, by at least some Ethiopians, of these notions of democracy and freedom, or as a repudiation of the pace and fairness of the economic development that has occurred.

The protest movement has a specific historic and linguistic meaning in Ethiopia, shaped by past and present meanings, influenced by the specificities of the place and the time. What do *protest* and *democracy* mean today in comparison to earlier iterations of protest in Ethiopia?⁴ What does an Ethiopian of a particular ethnic, language group or region mean when she protests for more freedom in 2016 as compared to in 1974 or 1989? Is it a freedom that is distinct from earlier struggles for freedom or does it reflect a continuity?

There is no doubt in my mind that Ethiopians in the diaspora and their compatriots at home are searching for a shared language of *freedom* today. Protests in ethnic Oromo regions of Ethiopia began around November of 2015, and since that time more than 800 people have been killed and at least 25,000 jailed by the ruling government, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).⁵ Protests erupted in city after city and were met with harsh and violent crackdowns by the police and military forces of the ruling government, nationwide media blackouts, punitive firing of civil servants and expulsion of students.⁶ The spark in November of 2015 was the announced plan by the ruling government, called the Addis Ababa Master Plan, to expand the capital city onto the lands of the ethnic Oromo community. The protests spread across the country and into areas not only of the Oromo com-

⁴ For example, the 1974 Revolution deposed Emperor Haile Selassie and was the consequence of a broad movement of "students, teachers, unemployed youth, civil servants, taxi drivers, soldiers" (Bahru Zewde 1991, 229). The demise of the subsequent regime of the military dictatorship of the Derg came through civil wars rather than "protests" per se, but protests were there nonetheless (Keller 1988; Zewde 1991).

⁵ It is important to note that most of the people jailed were never formally charged but were released after "reeducation" on the ruling regimes' notions of "democracy" and "development." The highest-level political prisoners, including political opposition and journalists, have not been released and are charged with treason.

⁶ Human Rights Watch 2016.

² Schaffer 2016, 7.

³ Igunza and Edwards, BBC, 8/26/16.

munity but also areas of the Amhara ethnic group, where protests were related to issues of land rights and political autonomy as well. The sporadic but relatively sustained protests reflected complex constellations of both longstanding and more recent grievances of land loss and political alienation, charges of corruption and administrative mismanagement, rapid and uneven economic growth and unmet expectations.

The ruling regime blocks Ethiopians' ability to freely exchange perspectives, making it difficult for shared meanings to emerge or for outsiders to interpret or analyze any intended meanings. Exchange is blocked in multiple ways, particularly through internet and phone blackouts as well as by complex and highly effective surveillance networks and monitoring systems. It is also blocked in the sense that communities inside and outside the country are divided in their language of *freedom*, their sense of what that means today.

In particular, a clear connection between *development* and *freedom* has not yet emerged. Is the freedom sought by some a freedom that is shaped by a logic of economic development and the kind of hyper-capitalist economic development that Ethiopians have experienced in the last decade or so? Or is it freedom that is informed by individual political rights and liberties that somehow unleash economic opportunities? The degree to which these two sets of contestations are interlinked is informed by relationships among and between the 75 or so distinct ethnic and linguistic communities in the country. How do the various communities inside Ethiopia relate to one another and to the vast and valuable resources that provide the engine of the *development* that provides the *freedom* that Ethiopians raise their arms in an X in pursuit of? How do Ethiopians share that freedom with one another? These unanswered questions are urgently political but also conceptual.

In the elucidation technique of *location*, Schaffer points to the reality that words “do not necessarily have stable or fixed meanings across times or tongues.”⁷ In a country with some 75 distinct ethnolinguistic communities, there are different understandings of *freedom* and *protest* worth thoughtful interpretive elucidation. When I was writing my book on language policy and national citizenship in Ethiopia a few years ago, I would ask respondents to explain to me the meaning of the opening line to the 1995 Constitution of Ethiopia which identifies the citizenry as the “*beheroch, behersebwoch ina hizbwoch*” or the “nations, nationalities and peoples” of Ethiopia.⁸ What that means as a founding set of citizenship identities was contentious and complex across the country. (What is the difference between a *nation*, a *nationality*, and a *people*? Why must they be identified together, and at the outset, and what role does that play in the shaping of Ethiopian national identity?) It would be even more difficult to investigate this question of language and citizenship in Ethiopia today.

The specifics of *how* Ethiopians understand national citizenship, inclusion, and especially *freedom* and *democracy* today must be elucidated in a modern context, as well as a historical one. However, just using an English word in translation

will obscure far more than it will illuminate. In his seminal history of modern Ethiopia, Bahru Zewde writes about the 1974 revolution: “indeed, the equivalent term for ‘revolution’ (*abyot*) was a relatively recent one in the Amharic lexicon; many came to learn it only after its eruption.”⁹

These insights from Zewde and Schaffer help explain the difficulty that Western and international donors had when they attempted to respond to Ethiopians' recent calls for “freedom.” In the present period, in the international and domestic news media, in the protests and the protest calls are critiques of the large amounts of international aid that go to Ethiopia annually from donors like the United States, the European Union and the multilateral institutions. What responsibility do these powerful partners have in influencing outcomes towards *freedom* in Ethiopia, particularly when the instruments of state violence are being used against unarmed and generally peaceful protesters?

In the last year or more since the Oromo/Ethiopian protests began I have been sometimes paralyzed by my own inability to navigate a space between two responses to the Ethiopian protests—one that is too embedded in advocacy for one or another particular local community for my comfort as a scholar, and one that is too removed and too enmeshed in the vague language of development. The former approach would suggest that I pick sides in a sense, somehow decide which ethnic community has suffered the most, or which history is true, a most suspect task for a political scientist. The latter approach, and one often chosen by social scientists, prefers a seemingly neutral concept formation, one that is “value-free, objective and...detached from a broader context of political contestation.”¹⁰ In the Ethiopian case, the best way to do that is to retreat to the numbers on economic development. But that is precisely why so many experts did not anticipate the protests of the last 18 months and were unable to explain their persistence: international finance institutions and development experts have praised the country for its GDP growth of six to 10 percent (World Bank 2016). It is also a perspective that misses the deeply normative and ethical implications of equating GDP growth rate with freedom. Somewhere in between the former and latter approach is the opportunity to unpack the ideas of protest and freedom and maybe even democracy and development that are deployed by the protesters, the Ethiopian state, the donors and analysts in the international community.

To grapple with these questions requires at least some role for social scientists and historians who can contribute an elucidation of the historicized, meaning-making understandings of *freedom* by protesters in Ethiopia. Schaffer reminds me of the many important applications of interpretivist tools to this challenge of meaning-making and their potential to yield “liberating insight.”¹¹

I think that what we are witnessing in Ethiopia is a complex dynamic of *protest* and *acquiescence*: some citizens have taken to the streets, but most Ethiopians in the country con-

⁷ Schaffer 2016, 55.

⁸ Smith 2013.

⁹ Zewde 1991, 228.

¹⁰ Schaffer 2016, 19.

¹¹ Yanow 2014, 145, cited in Schaffer 2016, 90.

tinue to go about their business of work, school, religion, attending to family and community. Many citizens are still contemplating the choice between the kinds of exceptionally cautious reform paths they have been on in recent decades versus the more fully wrought political revolution that is touted in some corners, mostly in the diaspora. A fair number of Ethiopians have benefited from recent economic gains, particularly in Addis Ababa and other regional towns, and are reluctant to put those economic gains at risk. Surely many are also impatient for more than just the kind of “developmental state” vision that the regime has been touting to the donors, particularly with its paternalistic and restrictive vision of social space and the practices that accompany it. But many Ethiopians have been down this road of protest and revolution before and they are wise enough to contemplate its implications and the alternatives.

For these reasons, I think we see the protests proceed in fits and starts, in spurts that fizzle and reignite. Something may set that spark, however, which is how the earlier *abyot*, or revolutions, have taken off, sometimes before there was even language for them. We know that protest is part of the process. Protest is not necessarily a rejection of citizenship or the regime or the 1995 Constitution, as the state tends to project it, but may rather be an embrace, through contestation, a “citizenship act”¹² that is still distinguishing itself from earlier epochs in Ethiopian history. If the ruling government could see peaceful protest as civic engagement it could perhaps find an imaginative spark for new civic identities, and new civic spaces, rather than older models of state repression.

I am certain that the outcomes of ongoing political protests in Africa’s second largest country and the world’s fifth largest refugee-hosting country, Ethiopia, are quite consequential for us all. Schaffer offers the exciting possibility that the techniques of elucidation and, in fact, the methodological resources of interpretivism in general can create new windows of inquiry into the objects of our study. This “emancipated” knowledge is possible because the tools do not take concepts as givens but treat the concepts themselves as fields of study. That is very much what concepts should be—windows into the social world around us, ways to make sense of processes with potentially profound consequences.

Classroom Applications

In introducing Schaffer’s book, I said that it would be a great addition to any graduate studies curriculum in the social sciences. The book is a thoughtful introductory volume for a graduate course in social science methods as the title and series it is placed in suggests. It is, however, significantly more than that, and I want to say something here about that. It would be a serious mistake for this guide to be read only by interpretivists. It will also make an invaluable contribution to a general survey course, should departments and programs be genuinely committed to intellectual and methodological pluralism. It is accessible and broad ranging enough for those new to non-quantitative methods and filled with examples from

other disciplines (history, anthropology, literature) as well as a variety of sub-fields in political science, including American Politics and International Relations (American elections, just war theory).

It is full of interesting and succinct examples and cases, both old and new. Schaffer addresses Sartori’s use of the *family* as a universal concept and its deconstruction as a specific, local and subjective concept.¹³ And Schaffer introduces discussion of *Columbusing* with which he demonstrates how the technique of “grounding” or using “ethnographic investigation of grammar” provides a powerful tool of conceptual elucidation.¹⁴ He describes the use of the term *Columbusing* in reference to one’s travels abroad and as a critique of gentrification or racial discrimination, shedding light on social processes with distinct social and political meanings.

Schaffer uses his elucidation techniques to critique work in sociology, literature, history, anthropology and political science, demonstrating the tremendous reach of interpretivist contributions and making the slender volume a likely contribution to methodological training and theory work in a variety of disciplinary traditions, not only political science. He challenges the positivist social science notion that concepts are formed anew, but rather points to what they do as a “refashioning [of] already existing terms in an effort to remove deficiencies such as ambiguity and vagueness.”¹⁵ For an interpretivist, the positivist notion of concept formation is an exercise that removes the lived and intersubjective nature of social reality and the language in which concepts are deployed by the very social beings that we study. Elucidation, then, is the study not of the individual opinions about any set of games, but the shared “terms of reference, the rules that constitute . . . games.”¹⁶

I encourage scholars to use this useful textbook to spark their own imagination as well as that of their students and colleagues. Even for the majority of social scientists, including political scientists, who intend to use quantitative and formal models, exposure to the insights of interpretivists and the examples that Schaffer lays out here will be of tremendous value. An excellent addition to upper-division undergraduate and early graduate methods courses, this guide can also provoke a bit of healthy imaginative conceptual mapping for even the most seasoned scholar hoping to get a new angle on a topic that has been nagging at them.

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¹² Isin and Nielsen 2008.

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Schaffer's Elucidating Social Science Concepts: Notes of a Conceptualist in the Field

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I am quite sympathetic to many aspects of the anthropological and ethnographic approach defended by Fred Schaffer in his *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*.¹ Much of my methods work is motivated and informed by what I call "methodological anthropology," which I define as the examination of the practices of social scientists and philosophers regarding concept formation and construction.

My original interest in concepts started from the observation that social scientists and philosophers spend a lot of energy and effort defining, disputing, and thinking about concepts. At the same time, concept methodology was completely absent from methods, statistics, and research design textbooks. These have chapters on measurement but nothing about concepts.

Schaffer's chapter 2 has the subtitle "how people understand a concept." He focuses on "everyday people" as subjects of his methodology; in contrast, I have focused on social scientists and philosophers as subjects. This is a major difference between our interests. For example, in addition to understanding social science practice, I give advice to my subjects (social scientists) on how to do things better. Fred is not telling everyday people how to do concepts better.

At the same time, I completely agree with almost all the "lessons" he has for elucidating concepts and would apply these lessons to my target groups. For example, his postulate to "investigate ordinary use" is critical because people, in-

cluding social scientists, do all kinds of odd things with concepts. This analysis is critical in producing better social science concepts. "Compare the use of the same word in different language games" means, for example, that one should look at how political theorists or philosophers work on a concept, say democracy, versus quantitative social scientists. "Examine opposites and negations" is absolutely essential to distinguishing between what I call the positive and negative poles. Terminology is critical and signals all sorts of issues. For example, social scientists cannot agree on what to call "not-democracy" and this has varied over time, with popular options like monarchy (19th century), dictatorship,² authoritarian, totalitarian, etc. So I completely endorse his recommendation to "follow the clouds of etymology."

In short, much of Schaffer's ethnographic advice works very well in understanding how social scientists develop and use concepts.

Much of chapter 3 resonated with me as well. The analysis of historical developments and genealogy is critical to understanding social science concepts. For example, one cannot understand the polity or Freedom House datasets without an understanding of their history. Many things that seem odd or curious about these datasets arise from the fact that they were not meant to capture concepts of democracy at the beginning! They have evolved and been adapted over time, but still retain traces of their origins. Freedom House was about the concept of liberty—social, economic, and political. It eventually morphed into a democracy dataset. The polity concept of anocracy, which is now used to refer to competitive-authoritarian regimes, originated in the concept of anarchy.³

In short, much of chapters 2 and 3 is directly relevant to thinking about how social scientists and philosophers develop, debate, and use concepts and is good advice to all those interested in concept methodology.

Chapter 4 is about "elucidating power." A good example of this practice is the literature on gender and politics because one of the first moves of a gender scholar is to deconstruct and analyze the gender bias of traditional concepts. For example, it is fascinating to see how the World Bank conceptualizes "indigenous people," a concept that is very politicized and that has large real-life implications for these peoples. The discussion in the literature is reminiscent of Foucault talking about an institutionalization of "insanity-madness" (*folie* in the 18th century). To apply this practice more broadly, theories involving democracy and democratization would probably require some significant changes if women's voting were included in the major concepts and datasets, where women are quite notable by their absence.⁴ The same issue applies to minorities, e.g., African-Americans, in democracy concepts and datasets: for example, the USA in 1920 is coded a maximal democracy by polity.

Schaffer contrasts "positivist reconstruction" with "interpretivist elucidation." What "positivism" means is a hotly

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¹ Schaffer 2016.

² Przeworski et al. 2000.

³ Gurr 1974.

⁴ See Paxton (2000) and Paxton et al. (2003) for nice discussions.