

¹² Eric Schickler, *Disjointed Pluralism: Institutional Innovation and Development in the U.S. Congress* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Daniel Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies,*

1862-1928 (Princeton, 2001). Laitin might complain that Schickler was once associated with the Yale department.

¹³ *Flight*, 198.

¹⁴ *Flight*, 203.

Symposium II: Conceptualizing Concepts

Introduction

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A symposium on the idea of “concepts” is a tricky matter. For one thing, the relevant issues have a way of persistently reflecting back on themselves. And when they do, the task becomes a knottier one of trying to conceptualize what it means to conceptualize, which hurls us headlong into debates about theory and practice and the endless loops associated with those. The usual editorial challenges of characterizing a plurality of perspectives are thus compounded in this case. The initial condition of recognizing the contestedness of conceptual meanings, for instance, must be that participants in a debate about it speak in their own diverse terms, traditions, aims, and demands, where possibly a plurality of conversations ensues. The job is made all the more thorny by the fact that what an adequate description of the terrain of debates about concepts should look like is itself an open question, depending on the various purposes one could invoke for thinking about them.

But I leave these admittedly not-so-trivial issues aside for the moment to hit on the equally significant points of convergence among the views presented here. For what these authors are doing as a group is drawing our attention to the often neglected set of considerations about how we should understand concepts even before we try to do the various things we could do with them. And there is good reason to commend this general stance, regardless of where one stands on some of the particulars, because so much of what passes for scholarship in political science today proceeds without a trace of due attention to issues like the scope and boundaries of concepts (cf. Choi, Freedon), the real world contestation over meanings and usage (cf. Davis), and legitimate versus illegitimate conceptual applications (cf. Bevir). It is not an exaggeration to say that most of the research emanating from the scholarly mills today evinces little or no concern for these at all. Dominating our top journals are arguments of the ilk that try to demonstrate the impact of x on y with a narrow explication of the statistical significance thereof, e.g. articles that identify the particular causes of institutional change, voter turnout, or the impact of GDP on democratic consolidation, or the possibilities for a “democratic peace,” to name a few.

The overwhelming emphasis of the discipline is squarely on attempts to model regularities in the social world, typically by isolating variables and demonstrating their seeming causal affectabilities against each other. Whatever one’s view about

this, closer attention ought to be paid to the ways that concepts actually operate, for example, to the functions they serve in academic research versus real world politics (cf., Freedon, Davis). Doing so could lead us to insights that advance our pursuit of knowledge and may even elevate the character of the discipline as a whole. To be sure, it would alter not only the kinds of research outcomes we get but also the process of inquiry itself (cf., Choi, Bevir). If these authors are right, then paying closer attention to concepts would heighten our awareness of the interaction and inter-relations between variables, in addition to merely their discreet causal effects. It may help us to resolve some messy operationalization issues for particular concepts, or at least motivate us to come up with adequate ways of explaining processes, events, actions, or speech that are by nature essentially contested and irreducibly contestable.

To begin, Freedon makes a concerted effort to draw specific parameters around concepts that are characteristically political in nature, even while simultaneously showing us the impossibility of establishing boundaries that are static, or in any way pre-determined in their content. Part of the difficulty lies in what he lays out as the fundamentally evaluative nature of political concepts. He offers a taxonomical analysis of the relative normative weights that political concepts carry in practice—at the intersecting levels of significance, legitimacy, and intensity—that set political concepts apart from any other run-of-the-mill concept. In studying politics, therefore, we have reason to be alert to the structural aspects of concepts that do not readily meet the eye but nonetheless operate in multiple and dynamic ways—by discursive, illocutionary, or even subversive means.

Choi is much less comfortable with the notion of the “political” as a separate or privileged category of concepts. Rather, she argues that all human action and social practices, including political science (itself a social practice not unlike those we seek to gain knowledge about), are each imbued with whatever meanings its practitioners attach to their concepts, and are therefore coextensive with the theories, purposes, and beliefs of its participants. What she argues is required for explanation-giving is a “family resemblances approach” to concepts that makes possible hermeneutical accounts that elucidate the particular concepts through which the meanings of agents operate. She contends that while concepts essentially constitute social practices, they are vague, by nature, because of the variable ways that people can construe meanings. Thus the vagueness of concepts is something we as political scientists should try to get more comfortable with and not try to skirt or pretend away; certainly not by various means of conceptual abstraction and reification, or mechani-

cal explanations of processes that bypass the agents' concepts altogether.

Davis points to several examples and domains in which the aim of clarifying concepts that have inherently fuzzy borders shows itself to be self-defeating. The dilemma lies in the conflict between the twin social-scientific virtues of analytic differentiation and conceptual validity, and the inability of even the most conscientious methodologist to capture the pervasive variation in the realm of empirical observation. His exemplary case is the concept of democracy and the controversies surrounding efforts to construct valid data-sets—evinced by the proliferation of sub-types and “diminished subtypes”—which he argues provides further evidence for his contention that much of the social construction of meaning takes place at the boundaries of our concepts rather than their cores.

Bevir takes up the particular issue of “anachronism” through which he shows how we can legitimately treat our concepts as valid for other times and places. He offers a philosophical argument for the universal applicability of certain concepts we hold, such as “action” and “procedural individualism.” The grammar of our concepts implies that such concepts apply across the board, in that by deploying our concept of action, for instance, we are committed to the concept of intentionality that it entails, despite the wide-ranging historical or cultural dissimilarities we would want to recognize in the content of such concepts. He argues that the grammar of our concept of “meaning” also commits us to a procedural individualism that precludes us from postulating meanings that we can not attribute, at least in principle, to certain people. These concepts are sufficiently abstract and capture general human faculties or capacities, but they do not prescribe specific content to those faculties or capacities. Thus he argues that the danger of anachronism arises only when we attempt to re-enact past beliefs, ideas, or intentions in a way that ascribes to people particular beliefs or intentions that they could not have held.

So where's the pay-off in heeding any of this? What we have here, after all, is a methods symposium. So what *qualitative* techniques in particular, if any, can be offered to help sort through the questions raised by these articles? Most of the authors do intimate, and in some places quite explicitly recommend, some practical measures that are entailed by the view of concepts the author is expounding. Readers will not, however, step away from here with the sense that what is being offered is a research program, a blueprint for explanation-giving, or a full epistemological theory that would have to underpin such ends. Indeed, the upshot of some of these arguments, though by no means all of them, is that methodology as a separate rarified scholarly activity may be superfluous. For Choi, the unease that this might bring can be diffused by doing away with the need for codifying techniques for proceeding into inquiry in the first place. She writes, “if the concepts embodied in our research techniques cannot reasonably be expected to be those of the participants of the practice we are studying, then they cannot rightly be used to explain them.” For Davis, the fuzziness of some of our most cherished and staple social scientific concepts, like “democ-

racy,” “peace,” and “war,” simply precludes their useful, not to mention reliable, operationalization. He writes, “rather than producing increased inter-coder reliability, efforts to increase operational precision have generated new lines of contention.”

Thus, depending on the perspective of the reader, what follows in these pages can appear to require some massive changes in the discipline. Perhaps more than many of us could comfortably admit. (How hard, after all, are we willing to bite the hand that feeds us?) On the other hand, the explication of what supports the political-science-as-usual model can be quite consistent with a more conservative view of our scholarly practices. Either way, paying due attention to the inherently decentered nature of the concepts we study can only move us toward garnering greater relevance in the world at large than presently seems to be the case.

What Makes a Political Concept Political?

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There is one area that political theory has barely begun to probe: what makes political thought *political*?¹ Not ethical, not philosophical, not historical, but political. What kind of everyday thinking is entitled to be called political thinking, and how should we, as scholars, try and make sense of such thinking? I take the political concept as the basic unit of political thinking—and by “concept” I mean a unit of meaning and of understanding that is incorporated in a unit of language, a signifier. The meeting of “concept” and of “politics” creates two dynamics in opposite directions. The first dynamic infuses thinking with the inescapable characteristics of concepts in general. Concepts are ambiguous, indeterminate, vague, and inconclusive. *Ipsa facto*, political thought will necessarily display those components as well, and I have dealt with that question recently.² The second, addressed here, identifies central features of the political, and then explores the manner in which language—as thought, text, speech, and non-verbal expression—discharges those features, and the manner in which concepts carry specifically political import. They do so in two ways: either through special attributes that are plainly political, or through the substantive issues they address. Because human interaction and thought always have a political dimension, whether significant or trivial, some fundamental features of political concepts are universal in a macro sense, while at the same time having particular manifestations at different times and places.

Thinking about Politics

What makes thinking political is its effective engagement in one or more of the following, in no particular order. It *ranks* aims, processes, and structures in order of importance; it *accents* and *justifies* political entities and procedures; it works