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Concepts, Political

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The expression “political concepts” refers to a set of concepts essential to any serious reflection on political life. This set includes authority, democracy, equality, freedom, justice, power and further concepts that represent fundamental political values and principles. Indeed, dictionaries of political thought in no small part consist of entries on terms that signify such central concepts. An expanded list would comprise conservatism, socialism, representation, the separation of powers, the welfare state, multiculturalism, public opinion and numerous other concepts in the realm of ideologies and institutions. They, too, form important building blocks of modern political thought.

Those who have explicitly theorized political concepts in recent times, however, have claimed that we should view definitions of these concepts as contributions to ongoing debates. Instead of assuming that such concepts can be clearly characterized and delimited, they have studied how the meanings and uses of words that refer to crucial concepts are frequently subject to dispute. The way that someone explains a concept such as democracy or justice is rarely politically neutral. Political concepts are contested; opposing groups invoke them but put forward different definitions and seek to promote their interpretations at the expense of others.

According to this view, political concepts are political in a double sense: they constitute central ideas, issues or arrangements of great political relevance, but the meanings of the concepts are topics of perpetual argument. Students of the political vocabulary will therefore encounter “microcosms” of disagreement and rivalry within concepts (Connolly 1993: 225). We need a shared stock of concepts to reflect upon political principles, institutions, movements, or tendencies, but these very concepts tend also to be drawn into and affected by our conflicts. Political concepts are not simply used to describe political life, but significant sites of political disagreement.

Even when people seem to agree on conceptual definitions in the abstract, the way they use concepts to categorize and assess the world can be designed to shape attitudes and perceptions. It matters, for instance, whether one calls a series of events that leads to a regime change a coup or a revolution, or presents a relationship between an employer and an employee as a case of exchange or exploitation. The words attached to concepts can be mobilized to make politically salient a reality that was previously seen as a domain untouched by discord. Indeed, the concepts of politics and the political have often been used to initiate fresh debates about social arrangements, as in the formulation “the personal is political.” In other words, concepts are means to instigate and conduct political struggles. And if successful, initially controversial but recurrent uses of key words such as exploitation or politics in new contexts may eventually find broader acceptance and shift what is perceived as the concept’s proper domain of application.

The expression political concepts may ultimately point to concepts that have been molded by myriad political moves, such as strategic redefinitions, polemical attacks, attempted appropriations of negative labels, and so on. Theorists of political concepts and historians of concepts often aim to show how political disputes contribute to the very process of concept formation and alteration. The appeal of such an approach should be apparent: those who write about political concepts maintain that the practice of politics itself helps generate the concepts with which it is interpreted. The concepts belong in the domain of political action.

In sum, most accounts of political concepts assume that the significance and scope of important concepts are continually negotiated through contentious interactions. This approach to political concepts rests on assumptions about the nature of agency, politics and language. The theorists of political concepts typically care about and believe in the efficacy of human agents who step into the public domain to justify political projects through speech and action; they associate or even equate politics with conflict and contestation and in some cases tend to value the existence of agonistic relationships; they emphasize the pragmatic dimension of language according to which words and phrases that express concepts are means to achieve particular objectives; and they assert that terms for concepts entangled in long-term disputes elude endeavors to establish stable

definitions and instead require genealogical reconstructions, which trace the complicated histories of ostensibly trans-historical values and phenomena.

These features set the study of political concepts apart from more rationalist projects to remove contestability from concepts by establishing clear and unequivocal descriptions. For the theorists of political concepts, the existence of conflicting definitions or quarrels over application is not necessarily a nuisance and may resist elimination. The study of political concepts also deviates from investigations into larger structures such as belief systems or socio-economically determined ideologies that seem to diminish the importance of agency enacted in local disputes and through rhetorical moves. This could be seen as a weakness, for the focus on a small number of political concepts may seem to lead to an incomplete grasp of the forces that shape political action. From a critical perspective, students of political concepts may appear to overestimate the significance of a few conspicuous terms in relation to the vast web of communications or the underlying paradigms of thought in which individual concepts play a role.

Political-Polemical Concepts: Carl Schmitt

In *The Concept of the Political* (1927/1932) and other works, the German political and legal theorist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) took steps toward a theory of political concepts. Schmitt notoriously claims that politics occurs through the emergence of a clear distinction between friend and enemy. The genuinely political situation erupts when cohesive groups crystallize through fierce conflict shadowed by the possibility of actual physical combat. In this framework, the concept of the political does not point to any particular domain or substance, but rather the degree of intensity of associations and dissociations among bounded groups of individuals, regardless of what religious, social, economic or ideological issue initially kindled the struggle between them.

Schmitt's concept of the political provides the backdrop to his definition of the political concept. For Schmitt, political concepts are concepts that are used against specific enemies. Every political concept, he writes, is a polemical concept. The words that signify such concepts do not simply refer to a political practice or evoke a political ideal but are introduced in order to refute, marginalize or discredit an adversary. In *The*

Concept of the Political, Schmitt does list concepts traditionally conceived as political, such as absolutism, dictatorship, class, republic, and state, but he does so not because they belong to a set of concepts perennially relevant to politics. Rather, they deserve their label only when they are employed to strengthen or weaken positions in a conflict between emerging factions.

For Schmitt, political concepts are best called political-polemical concepts, and he offers a few examples of how such concepts appear in attacks leveled at particular opponents. Schmitt claims, for instance, that the concept of the sovereign state was originally crafted to polemicize against those who espoused established notions of royal or princely sovereignty. The doctrine of state sovereignty, he continues, would be mysterious if one did not understand against whom this doctrine was first principally directed, namely the person of the monarch. Opposing monarchical rule, jurists tried to wrest sovereignty from the person of the sovereign and transfer it to the impersonal state. Sophisticated propagandists created an important political concept when they needed it in an ongoing battle, although these initial circumstances may have been forgotten.

In another context, Schmitt mentions how socialists in the Weimar Republic suggested that the sums paid by renters to landlords should be called tribute instead of rent. The socialist writers' motivation behind this suggested terminological change was to make the public view supposedly legal or economic relationships of exchange as relationships of hierarchy and subordination, which would harm the reputation of owners. A novel application of an established concept was meant to induce people to reclassify everyday social relations in a politically charged way.

One of Schmitt's main examples of a polemically loaded concept is the concept of the political itself. He notes that people often condemn others as motivated by political concerns and portray themselves as entirely unpolitical, insinuating that their opponents are prone to descend into petty quarrels or grubby fights over privileges whereas they merely seek solutions to problems. The terms political and unpolitical come with multiple associations and connotations that can be used politically, by which Schmitt means that they can be deployed to disqualify and denounce an enemy.

Schmitt defines political concepts as those concepts that agents construct or redeploy to achieve political ends in concrete contexts structured by friend-enemy

divisions; they are political tools or even weapons. This basic theory of political concepts has, Schmitt notes, implications for the student of political thought. The historical significance and even the precise meaning of ostensibly enduring concepts such as democracy or freedom will elude readers who do not discern the polemical character they assume when they are absorbed by the politics of the day. And one can best uncover this political-polemical character of concepts by identifying the central tensions between enemy camps. Who, one should presumably ask, is introducing or applying this concept to discredit or undermine support for whom? Specifically, one can only fully understand the political work performed by a concept when one is familiar with the alternative concepts that the speaker or writer is trying to suppress, discard or replace (the concept of the sovereign state seeks to weaken the association between sovereignty and the monarch). A political concept is, according to Schmitt's reasoning, typically a concept pitted against other concepts, or it constitutes a counter-concept and is in this way enmeshed in political struggles.

The distinctive feature of political concepts is, according to Schmitt, that they possess a certain force, or even punch, derived from their position in a conceptual antithesis ultimately rooted in the vision of an imminent clash between distinct groups. Schmitt even indicates that only political struggles between demarcated collectives infuse concepts with the fullness of meaning, without which they are nothing but spectral abstractions. Sharp political contrasts are what lend concepts significance in the double sense of clear meaning and heightened vividness.

Yet Schmitt also notes that a politically dominant group may want to present its language as an undisputed vocabulary of neutral terms. It is often advantageous to offer one's statements as mere descriptions of an objectively present terrain or encapsulations of commonsensical principles rather than as targeted attacks or maledictions. As a politically engaged scholar and theorist, Schmitt himself therefore seeks to recover disavowed or faded antagonisms and expose the concealed polemical meanings of concepts assumed to be neutrally descriptive categories. In this way, Schmitt's perhaps inchoate theory of political or politicized concepts points to the necessity of conceptual history that can reveal how actors who need stirring words and compelling ideas in their polemical engagements with each other drive the formation of political concepts.

Essentially Contested Concepts: W. B. Gallie

In a lecture held in 1956, the British philosopher W. B. Gallie (1912-1998) introduced the idea of essentially contested concepts, which has since inspired numerous political theorists to offer elaborations and refinements. In his talk, Gallie set out to identify the features of concepts that attract endless disputes over their proper meaning and correct use. Concepts such as democracy or social justice are widely shared and often deemed pivotal by those who invoke them, but people do not agree on their meanings and implications. No usage can be set up as the standard one. Central concepts in politics are thus likely to become focal points of intractable disputes. The concepts are political in that they become zones of chronic and deep-running disagreements.

Gallie lists a series of features that characterize the essentially contested concept. The concept is typically appraisive or signifies some valued achievement; the valued achievement captured by the concept must be internally complex so that different users can emphasize different aspects and offer diverging descriptions and explanations of its worth; the concept is open in that it can be applied to new and unforeseen circumstances. Gallie thus points to concepts that represent something of great value to most speakers, but that are nevertheless multifaceted, even when people can agree that some particular exemplar represents an embodiment of the notion.

A concept such as democracy, for instance, names an achievement or principle held in high esteem by a great number of people, who will appeal to the concept in their reasoning on political matters. At the same time, opposing groups can apply the concept to different arrangements, select and articulate different criteria to delineate what counts as an acceptable realization of democracy, and attack each other for misunderstanding or abusing the term. As a result, we can expect never-ending fights over the concept.

In the case of social justice, Gallie's other main example, he discerns two opposing definitions that he associates with commutation and distribution, respectively. One contemporary camp maintains that justice consists in arrangements that allow individuals to secure resources based on their achievements, whereas the other ties the concept of justice to the provision of necessary goods to every member of society. Rather than reconstruct and assess the arguments for and against these opposing understandings

of social justice, Gallie notes that they both spring from venerable traditions of moral teaching and remain recognizable to people in their daily lives. Gallie's point is that social justice is a concept shared by individuals located at different points on a political spectrum, that it can be understood and applied in different ways by speakers who emphasize different facets, that each such interpretation can be sustained by respectable arguments, and that the internal ranking of these interpretations cannot be settled once and for all. Again, the consequence is interminable dispute.

When opponents articulate their understanding of concepts such as democracy or social justice, they marshal arguments, but there is, according to Gallie, no general principle for deciding which understanding should prevail over the other. Gallie does admit of one major objection to this account of essentially contested concepts, namely that the disputes over the proper use of one concept are due to confusion of several concepts that could in principle be distinguished from one another. On this view, quarreling groups could come to see through a process of clarification and disaggregation that they happen to be using a single word for what are in fact two or more discrete concepts. The widespread reliance on one term then conceals the possibility of the consistent use of multiple concepts that should be held apart. But Gallie contends that parties will be reluctant to abandon the cherished word, often claim to sustain and develop a common tradition neatly encapsulated by it, and even seek to anchor their use by references to a shared exemplar (such as the Athenian *polis* or the American Revolution). The contending parties would not accept the work of tidy conceptual separation as a genuine solution.

For concepts such as democracy, justice, power, freedom, and equality, discord proves irrepressible because of these concepts' inherently complex and open character. Gallie further claims that the persons who employ the words that signify these concepts are hardly unaware of the ongoing rivalries; they know that to use an essentially contested concept means to enter a competitive field and deploy it aggressively and defensively against opposing factions. People acknowledge that a given concept has inspired multiple interpretations but try to fix the criteria of its application and make their own use the most broadly recognized one. Their aim is precisely to achieve a decontestation of the contested concept, or narrow down the range of perceived

alternative interpretations. Gallie expresses the hope that awareness of competing uses will compel contestants to sharpen the quality of their arguments, but concedes that once concepts are understood as essentially rather than contingently contested, many will relinquish their attempts at persuasion and concentrate on damning the dissenters.

Essentially Contested Concepts: Responses and Developments

In his seminal essay on essentially contested concepts, W. B. Gallie claimed that disputes over the meaning and proper use of central evaluative concepts in political philosophy are not amenable to any final and conclusive resolution. Since its publication, his argument has been a source of inspiration – and of irritation – for political theorists. Critics such as John Gray have been concerned that Gallie’s view inevitably leads to relativism. When Gallie asserts that the debates surrounding a particular concept cannot be decided by rational argument, Gray and others claim that he surrenders the means of evaluating the relative validity of different interpretations and would be forced to accept the most idiosyncratic usages, even as he continues to speak of how disputants can mobilize respectable reasons. Others, such as Ernest Gellner, have maintained that Gallie’s account captures the nature of conceptual controversies in a way that does not preclude structured deliberations. Although there may be no single correct definition of a political concept, not all usages will appear equally acceptable; it is just that continuous debate constitutes the real life of the concept. Gallie’s formulation economically sums up the “endemic litigation-proneness” of concepts shared and treasured by antagonistic political agents (Gellner 1974: 100).

In consequence, many thinkers have sought to preserve Gallie’s central insight and explore its implications. William Connolly has presented Gallie’s notion of essentially contested concepts as a challenge for the social sciences. According to Connolly, social and political scientists typically strive to establish a set of terms, the clarity and precision of which make them acceptable to any investigator regardless of his or her politics or normative commitments. They cannot, however, hope to insulate their definitions from the conceptual contests. It is, Connolly asserts, impossible to forge a purely technical terminology of political inquiry out of the normative and evaluative language of politics, or impossible to define and analyze democracy, interest, or power

without making some implicit judgment on political practices. As a result, social scientist cannot draw an absolutely clear distinction between describing political life and participating in it.

Michael Freeden and others have argued that single contested concepts should not be studied in isolation, but are best construed as elements in more comprehensive systems of ideas, or ideologies. A certain interpretation of democracy, for instance, is linked to particular conceptions of freedom, justice, and power, all of which are also essentially contested concepts. The dispute over a particular concept is rarely a localized conflict but typically involves entire networks composed of tightly interrelated and mutually supportive ideas. Gallie's study, as well as any other study of political concepts, is therefore only the first step toward an understanding of the more encompassing patterns of thought that specify the role and meaning of the assembled concepts and give form to attitudes in political life.

Further, Terrence Ball has pointed out that an essentially contested concept is not necessarily incessantly contested. While the concept's meaning and use might in principle be open to contestation, actual rancorous disputes can come to an end or be temporarily closed off depending on the political situation. Finally, Gellner suggests that frequent contests around multiple concepts may be indicative of more open and politically diverse societies, whose members encounter each other in debate and at least formally uphold the idea that reason-based conversions are possible. In other words, openly conducted struggles over concepts tell us something about the social and political conditions in which they take place. Essentially contested concepts reveal themselves as such in more pluralist climates.

Political Concepts and Ordinary Language Use: Hanna Pitkin

Theorists of political concepts hold that disagreements are intrinsic to politics and likely to become manifest in disputes over conceptual meaning. A question that follows is then how political philosophers can productively clarify conceptual arguments while remaining sensitive to deep-seated differences, perhaps by separating mere confusions from genuine conflicts. While not the work of a self-described theorist of political concepts, Hanna Pitkin's (1931-) study *The Concept of Representation* from 1967

nonetheless provides a possible model for how a careful exploration of conceptual meaning can elucidate, if not resolve, conceptual controversies.

Pitkin shows that the concept of representation has received a series of diverse and incompatible treatments, by canonical political philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes as well as more contemporary political scientist. Some assume, for instance, that relationships of representation consist in accurate resemblance between the representative and the represented, whereas others focus on how legitimate representation comes into being through formal procedures of authorization, regardless of any meaningful likeness between the involved parties.

Given the multiple definitions, it is not surprising that political representatives are judged according to different standards. Representatives who do not closely follow instructions from constituencies can be cast as covert oligarchs who betray the very people they are meant to represent, whereas delegates who never stray from carrying out orders can be dismissed as mere tools. Pitkin herself eventually seeks to convert these opposing views into coexisting limits on the acceptable use of the concept. A representative should indeed be neither an oligarch nor a mere tool; the bond of representation exists only when the autonomy of the representative is reconciled with responsiveness to the represented, a paradoxical requirement that makes representation a precarious political institution.

Yet Pitkin's mode of analysis in her work on the concept of representation can be advanced as a generally applicable procedure. When facing conceptual disputes, Pitkin claims, a return to the single, basic definition of the concept in question may accomplish little. Instead she argues for a patient exploration of how the word taken to signify a political concept is ordinarily used by speakers in a range of contexts (a flag represents a country by symbolizing it; a map represents a territory by selectively depicting it; an attorney represents a client by acting in his or her stead and so on). Through such an examination of the varied and subtle nuances in the grammar of everyday language, Pitkin suggests, one discovers that theorists and scholars of representation often derive their conceptions from established uses of the word, but tend to generalize too widely from a small set of examples. For instance, it is not wrong to view representation in terms of resemblance between the representative and the represented, but this partial view,

founded in a particular bundle of word uses, should not eclipse the many other contexts and ways in which the concept is routinely deployed. Particular interpretations of representation as a political concept have rarely been entirely false, but frequently one-sided.

Much like the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Pitkin implies that a complex concept such as representation is not quite one single thing, but should be approached as a conglomerate of ways of speaking. To arrive at a better understanding of a political concept such as representation, one must seek to make explicit how the speakers of a language are already using the word, and not expect to encounter a perfectly uniform employment. Conceptual disputes arise so easily and seem so irresolvable because the meanings of concepts are in fact highly complex compounds of many and varied instances of use. A lucid overview of language use will not eliminate political conflicts between camps with different interests and commitments, but may help reframe entrenched positions as partially valid extrapolations from shared but varied ways of speaking.

Political Concepts and Conceptual History

The theoreticians of political concepts believe that concepts serve as sites and instruments of political struggle. Political agents seek to advance their own interpretations of hallowed but multifaceted concepts as the only valid definitions, or they appropriate loaded terms to redescribe events and arrangements in ways designed to make them matters of debate. Since political actors in conflict with one another use established concepts creatively when they define and announce positions, and since the constellation of political forces tends to shift over long periods, the way that central concepts are understood is likely to change. The focus on the political character of complex concepts leads one to consider the mutability of meaning over time; concepts vigorously fought over will have histories. There is a connection between theories of political concepts and studies in conceptual history.

Students of political concepts, then, do not set out to determine one single, coherent meaning of a concept that every reasonable person ought to accept. Instead, they construe definitions as moves in the contexts of ongoing political arguments and gather

and exhibit multiple and conflicting descriptions, in the present and throughout history. They assume that politically active agents redefine concepts and apply the words that signify them to new or different circumstances, and that this might occur with special frequency and verve in turbulent times, when new tendencies require a refreshed political vocabulary. The theorists of political concepts might approvingly cite Nietzsche's dictum that "only that which has no history is definable."

Conceptual History in the German Context: Reinhart Koselleck

In the German context, the leading proponent and practitioner of conceptual history is Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006), who also knew and was inspired by Carl Schmitt, but **who** belonged to an ideologically re-educated post-1945 generation and did not share his authoritarian views. Koselleck's work provides a clear example of the connection between the theory of political concepts and conceptual history. Apart from conducting his own diachronic studies of particular concepts (such as crisis or *Bildung*) and publishing theoretical reflections on conceptual history, he served as the main director of a lexicon that aimed to present the deep historical existence of so-called basic concepts [*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*]. Published in seven volumes over a period of two decades (1972-1992), the lexicon consists of more than a hundred entries, some of which are the length of a standard monograph.

The lexicon covers constitutional concepts (such as sovereignty or separation of powers), key words of political, social, and economic organization (such as party, system, or trade union), the central concepts and slogans of modern political movements (such as communism, critique, or progress) and the designations of major occupations and societal strata (such as class). This compelled the authors to deal with a host of traditional, even ancient terms that have remained relevant in new circumstances, words that continue to be used but have been infused with discrepant conceptual meanings over time, and suddenly appearing neologisms that transport novel concepts, all in order to determine both the continuities and discontinuities that characterize the modern political vocabulary.

In the course of supervising the lexicon project, Koselleck formulated a rudimentary theory of the political concept. He separated the concept from the technical and well-defined term by arguing that concepts are concentrates of multiple significances

and resonances that embody a complex historical reality in the process of transition. Further, he claimed that linguistically embodied political concepts are not just indicators that point to a set of conditions, but also factors or contributors in processes of change, insofar as agents use them as instruments to interpret and shape their situation. Finally, he noted that semantic struggles – whether in the form of conflicting attempts to determine the meaning of a single concept or controversies over how events, groups, and activities should be named and categorized – are likely to increase in frequency in times of great societal transformations. When the world changes, inherited concepts are destabilized.

Koselleck's discussion of the political concept is in fact geared towards the historical study of modernity's emergence. He wants to reconstruct conceptual shifts in order to trace the major socio-political trends in European history. A much-abbreviated example can serve to illustrate how conceptual history tracks the changing meaning of key words to show how semantic shifts make manifest societal change. In the seventeenth century, the German word *Bürger* signified the town-dweller, a person who enjoyed certain rights and privileges as an inhabitant of a recognized city. In the eighteenth century, however, the *Bürger* ceased to be the name for a particular and localized estate and became the general title for the citizen of a state; the concept widened and was democratized. In the nineteenth century, the conceptual meaning and resonances of this word changed yet again, in conjunction with emerging antagonisms. The *Bürger* became an economically defined figure, a member of the bourgeoisie, associated with ownership. According to socialists, the collective of *Bürger* stood against the proletariat in a conflict of world-historical import. In this way, the chain of redefinitions of a single key word mirrors politically crucial developments: the dissolution of an older order of manifold estates, the rise of increasingly democratic nation states, and the formation of a class-based society with its attendant ideologies.

For Koselleck, conceptual history studies the formation of new political vocabularies that in turn disclose tendencies specific to modernity. His guiding thesis is that modern political concepts are quite different in character from those of the pre-revolutionary period of the Old Regime in Europe: they no longer belong to the world of an elite but are familiar to broader public spheres; they are typically unmoored from any particular place in shared social life and instead appear as mobile abstractions; and they

are informed by a perception of human history as non-cyclical and endowed with a forward movement towards a more ideal state. For instance, in Roman law, emancipation denoted the release of a young man at the threshold of maturity from out of the domain of the father. In the modern period, however, emancipation gradually advanced from its function as a circumscribed legal term to become a name for the self-liberation of entire classes, religious communities or nations, subtended by a vision of an historical movement towards greater equality. The concept attached to the word emancipation thus expanded and became suffused with a veritable philosophy of history.

Indeed, Koselleck is perhaps most known for his studies of how modern concepts such as development, progress or revolution emerge as instruments of anticipation and evocation meant to generate solidarity in large populations. He conceives of conceptual history as a method with which to register the disjunction of the past and the future in the modern period, or to show how people's horizon of expectation began to drift away from their space of experience towards the end of the eighteenth century. In this context, Koselleck pays special attention to the emergence of what he terms collective singulars, grand concepts designed to encompass and unite manifold events and actions that were previously not thought of as instantiations of a single process. In the period before the end of the Ancien Regime, for instance, there was only a plurality of individual histories, the history of Gustavus Adolphus, the history of France and so on. In the post-revolutionary situation, however, thinkers increasingly spoke about history in the singular, as one unified medium for everything that occurs, or a chain of events with an overarching logic. An apparently small modification, from histories to history, signals a momentous conceptual transformation.

In his study of concepts as indicators and factors in the historical process, Koselleck is intent upon showing how the very character of vital political concepts undergoes systematic changes in modernity. In an historical light, emancipation, progress, revolution, and other concepts that partly compose the current political vocabulary seem future-oriented and abstract, no longer nourished by actual past experience. As such, post-revolutionary concepts are symptoms and vehicles of a specifically modern outlook. Like Schmitt, Koselleck believes that political concepts must be understood against the background of shifting political contexts, but he also

claims that conceptual history reveals how modern political concepts are fundamentally distinct: they reveal that modern politics always takes place on a world-historical stage.

Conceptual History in the British Context: Quentin Skinner

Conceptual historians have revealed how the conduct of politics itself informs concept formation and alteration throughout Western political history. In the British or Anglophone context, Quentin Skinner (1940-), an intellectual historian with a focus on the political thought of the early modern period and a member of the so-called Cambridge School, stands out as an important contributor to the political history of concepts. While Skinner has not seen himself as a practitioner of conceptual history as a distinct discipline, he has nonetheless supplied theoretical refinements as well as particular examples to the study of how concepts are formed and reformed in historically specific argumentative exchanges among political opponents.

Skinner's additions to the study of conceptual history are partly rooted in his familiarity with two approaches to language use, British philosophy of language as represented by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words*, on the one hand, and classical rhetoric, on the other. In these admittedly different traditions, Skinner has found means to describe how the linguistic utterances of political writers and thinkers are best understood as actions in particular contexts. Rather than seek to arrive at the best or most valid definition of any concept, Skinner argues that the historian ought to reconstruct what politically involved authors aimed to achieve with their various statements, as they were pursuing specific objectives in ongoing political disputes. In his analyses, Skinner follows Wittgenstein's adage that "words are deeds."

Skinner's guiding idea that language is above all used by politically interested thinkers to achieve pragmatic ends, such as justifying a political viewpoint or undermining a previously self-evident position, is consistent with other, earlier theoreticians of political concepts. Schmitt and others share the intuition that political concepts are concepts used as instruments of debate to promote or discredit practices. With his philosophical background, however, Skinner could introduce a more technical vocabulary to speak of how words are used in politics. Specifically, Skinner referred to

Austin's notion of speech acts to draw attention to the action completed by a verbal proposition. When a political writer praises someone as courageous, he or she is not simply describing someone's traits accurately or inaccurately, but actively putting him or her up as a paragon of virtue, or advancing one set of values over another. Utterances must be treated as actions performed in order to achieve the agent's intentions.

The idea that utterances constitute actions in particular contexts helps narrow the perceived gap between the politician and the political thinker, who could easily be misconstrued as an aloof philosopher rather than a problem-solver embroiled in contemporary conflicts. Skinner accordingly does not view the history of political thought as the series of interconnected answers that an exclusive group of prominent philosophers have thought up in response to eternal questions. Instead, he argues that this history has a more episodic character, in which thinkers respond to the exigencies of their time and place and deal with pressing issues and tendencies while relying on the conceptual resources at hand. The scholar can only recover the sense of how classic texts were attempts to solve local problems by placing them in the reconstructed context of numerous non-classical or more ephemeral contributions. If theoretical arguments and seminal definitions of key political concepts assume form in battles fought out among numerous politicking agents, the historian must survey the entire battlefield.

Skinner's approach is to some extent followed through in his studies on the emergence of the concept of the state, which in the eighteenth century had emerged as the master noun of political argument. Skinner is interested in the long process through which a word, the state, came to denote a distinct impersonal authority that alone wields legitimate force within a delimited territory, thus signaling people's clear and self-conscious possession of a more modern state concept. And it turns out that the emergence of this state concept is inseparable from waves of debate between schools of political thought supporting different causes.

Skinner begins with the word *status*, which in the early modern period was typically used in reference to the standing, eminence or reputation of a prince as a person and hence was not the name for a particular constitutional and legal order. Yet over time, the discussion of the advantageous standing of a prince became increasingly entwined with his ability to maintain his position as a ruler and preserve an existing regime, namely

his own. The word state, previously simply the current position of the prince, thus became associated with an existing regime, with a general area over which power could be exercised, and finally also the means of coercive control that serve to organize and maintain order. Such slippages were promoted and exploited by Renaissance champions of republics who were critical of princely domination. Yet later thinkers such as Hobbes, who disapproved of the identification of the state with a people in a region, helped move the concept of the state towards greater impersonality by arguing that the state represented a structure of power independent of both a particular ruler and of the people. In the flow of such arguments, the state finally appeared as a doubly impersonal entity, tied neither to a particular ruler nor to the people over which its powers could be exercised. Skinner argues that the modern concept of the state as an apparatus of power and an enduring fictional person was the result, or even the unintended by-product, of multiple disputatious episodes over the legitimate sources of law and objects of allegiance in which the term state was being used in new and extended ways. Generations of political struggles partly carried out by philosophers gave shape to a pivotal concept.

Skinner's study shows that he approaches concept formation from the perspective of active political life. Conceptual development, such as the evolution of the impersonal state concept from out of the vocabulary of princely rule, involves writers attuned to the issues of their age trying to tweak an established terminology until new conceptual meanings have become accepted. In general, Skinner focuses on what thinkers can possibly achieve with the vocabularies they have inherited, how far concepts can be stretched through previously untried applications, and pays special attention to cunning rhetorical moves that introduce new political projects in ways that do not violate common perceptions.

Interested in persuasion, few politically motivated writers can afford to depart entirely from conventions of usage and instead seek to revise them. Skinner also notes that such attempts to take cover under already established concepts and commonplaces are not always successful. In the sixteenth century, champions of commerce eager to legitimize their practices began to speak of care and prudence in monetary affairs as a form of religious commitment. But they failed to convince people of the pious character of business, with the result that the term religious simply took on the added meaning of

diligence and could be used in a novel and separate way. In this case, people did not begin to recognize business practices as genuine manifestations of devoutness and the concept of religiousness split into piety and mere diligence. The current multiple uses of the word religious represent a record of a failed attempt at persuasion. In this way, lexicon entries bear the traces of past political campaigns. And this captures one of the points of conceptual history, as practiced both in the Anglophone sphere and on the European continent: the political concept lives a fully political life, in that its meanings and accepted range of reference is not settled outside the domain of ongoing political speech and action.

Summary

Studies devoted to the idea of political concepts aim to demonstrate how concepts are both instruments of and arenas for political activity. W. B. Gallie and others have given crucial political concepts such as democracy, freedom, justice, and power the title essentially contested concepts; politically motivated disputes over their meaning cannot be laid to rest and the resulting, apparently interminable arguments are intrinsic to political philosophy. There is no neutral set of concepts with which one can parse politics, key terms are themselves subject to contention.

In line with this insight, conceptual historians argue that many important concepts such as state, sovereignty and emancipation have only emerged and assumed their current sense through a succession of political arguments and confrontations. Politics, as it is actively practiced in statements, manifestos, editorials, and philosophical texts, help draw and redraw conceptual boundaries. To be sure, much of political life consists not in contesting formed concepts or constructing new ones, but in applying agreed-upon and cherished notions in new contexts to render unseen injustices visible or identifying additional examples of virtue, with varying success. Concepts are used in politics and reconfirmed as political concepts when they are mapped onto societal terrains in innovative and controversial ways.

The concepts that we need to reflect upon political principles and procedures, then, are inhabited by disagreements and do not go unused in contentious arguments. If the interest in the topic of political concepts has nonetheless remained rather modest, it is

perhaps because most political theorists have been keen to study more comprehensive structures such as ideologies, discourses, or normative vocabularies, in which individual concepts appear as interconnected elements.

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