Giacomo Marossi

**Conceptual Disputes
in Political Theory:
A Pluralist Approach**

1. Introductory remarks

Disagreements over the meaning of concepts are very common in political studies, more common than in other fields like philosophy of mind or logic.[1] Probably this is the case because the very subject matter of politics is entangled in adversarial discourse between opposite factions, disagreeing about public choices like: is there a right to healthcare? Should my country go to war to defend its own interests? Or should the world community enhance globally environmental politics? Very often, these disagreements involve a dispute over the meaning of some concepts: just think of the endless dispute over the true meaning of democracy, freedom, justice, etc. Disputes like these, then, are the very bread and butter of political philosophers, but, as I will argue in this paper, this fact should not be used as an excuse to sweep methodological errors and conceptual confusion under the rag. In fact, we should firmly distinguish essentially contested concepts, that are all those concepts involving normative disputes about the fundamentals of political life (i.e., 'democracy'), from concepts that are just confused because of errors committed, in their construction or in their use, by scholars (i.e., 'populism'). In this paper, then, I will deal only with this second kind of problems and I will not enter the complex debate over normative and

---

[1] For more on disagreement in philosophy see: Bryan, Matheson (2019) and Christensen, Lackey (2013).

Biblioteca della libertà, LVI, 2021
Issn 2035-5866 • Doi 10.23827/BDL_2021_1
Nuova serie [www.centroeinaudi.it]

1

political disagreement.[2] For the limited purpose of my paper, moreover, I suggest we should adopt a philosophical approach to concepts that, with a metaphor borrowed from Simon Blackburn, I will call 'conceptual engineering'.[3] With this term I mean that, in approaching conceptual disagreements, we should firstly analyze the concept under discussion in search of any methodological shortcomings generating confusion and preventing a clear understanding of its meaning. This might seem obvious but, as we will see in this paper, it is not. For, there is no agreement, about how we should construct and analyze political concepts. As I will argue in this paper, this kind of metatheoretical disagreement is a main source of conceptual confusion in political theory. This happens because scholars usually use political concepts without reflecting on the consequences of their methodological choices. For instance, scholars experiment different structures for their concepts to win academic disputes and, in so doing, they create hidden sources of confusion and incommensurability between the various definitions: I call this hidden disturbance 'conceptual mishmash'. To solve this metatheoretical issue, I propose to adopt a pluralist approach to the conceptual construction providing for each concept a 'conceptual map' including elements from the two most important theories of political concepts, according to John Gerring's idea of a mini-max strategy: reconstructivism and ordinary language philosophy. This, in turn, will mean that we will provide two definitions, instead of one: a minimal and a maximal definition. The two definitions, together, will work as a conceptual map that scholars could easily apply, in any moment, to a concept, without getting lost in endless disputes over its definition and without incurring in conceptual mishmash.

2. *Conceptual disputes and political studies*

Given the high frequency of disagreements in political studies, some scholars argued that we should stop considering conceptual disputes as a prob-

---

[2] For more on normative and political disagreement see McMahon (2009).
[3] For more on conceptual engineering see Cappelen (2018).

lem but, instead, as a constitutive characteristic of political discourse.[4] This idea was originally proposed by W.B. Gallie in a 1956 paper titled *Essentially Contested Concepts* in which he argues that some political (and aesthetic) concepts should be considered as essentially contested, because they "inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie 1956). However, Gallie's original intention was to limit the scope of his framework to few specific political concepts, like 'democracy' or 'justice', in which the disagreement about their meaning implies, also, a disagreement about broader systems of values and world views. To see this, we just need to look a little deeper into the definition of essentially contested concepts that Gallie provides in his account: essentially contested concepts are subjected to divergent normative claims; they have an internal complex structure; this complex structure is describable from different points of view and they are open, meaning that they are subjected to diachronic evolution. The first condition clearly states that the essentially contested nature of concepts is given by the presence of a normative disagreement about them. This normative disagreement is the one we find in big conceptual disputes over the fundamentals of politics, like 'democracy' and 'justice'. It is in the very essence of these concepts to be subjected to never-ending debates between competing views putting forward not only a different conception of the concept under scrutiny, but also a normative theory of the society in which the concept is used. These so called 'conceptions' of political concepts, in fact, are usually part of broader ideologies and are debated, not only in the academic context, but, also, in the political arena; and this is the reason why they are charged with normative value.[5]

For example, let's think of two terms both subjected to dispute because of their meaning, like "populism" and "democracy". The term "democracy" will have different meanings and values depending on whether we take it from the liberal or from the socialist point of view. The former

---

[4] For more see Collier, Hidalgo, Maciuceanu (2006, 211-246).

[5] I follow here the interpretation given by Jeremy Waldron (2002, 137-164). A similar interpretation is present in Catherine Swanton, when she proposes a reading of essentially contestedness using Rawls distinction between conceptions and concepts. For more: Swanton (1985, 811-827).

will see it as a formal abstraction used to justify the institutional structure, whereas the latter will see it as indicating the active involvement of all the members of a society in economic and political decisions without implying the attribution of any kind of formal rights. Now, there is no way to settle whether the first or the second is the correct definition of democracy, without involving some kind of broader evaluative judgment about how society should be. For instance, during a consistent part of the last century, each of these two meanings of democracy were the mainstream view in, at least, half of the world (Held 2006). Therefore, following Gallie, the very essence of the concept of "democracy" has to be seen as a matter of political discussion based on competing conceptions. On the contrary, a concept like "populism" is subjected to a methodological dispute over its definition, because scholars are unable to reach an agreement over the kind of object they should identify populism with. Some scholars argue that it must be something in the way populists organize political activity and, therefore, they define populism as a political strategy aimed to connect a leader with his or her followers, in the most unmediated way (Weyland 2001). Others prefer to see populism as a communicative issue and define it as a style in which, like actors on the stage, populist politicians mimic the behavior of popular strata by using expressions and mannerisms referring to pop culture (Kazin 1998). Others, again, define populism as some kind of ideology stressing the fundamental role of the common people in politics (Mudde 2004). Now, because of the existence of all these concurrent positions, we could say that a definition of populism, one that everyone agrees on, is some sort of Holy Grail in political theory. In fact, for decades, scholars attempted to find such a definition, studying populism under any imaginable point of view and, still, they have not reached any appreciable agreement[6]. There is no big normative issue involved into this dispute, other than a potential conceptual confusion. Now, my point is that the large majority of political concepts on which political scholars disagree is not subjected to complex normative disagreements, as in the case of "democracy "and "justice", but, rather, to conceptual disputes like the one about populism.

---

[6] For an overview of the state of art of populist studies see Kaltvasser *et al.* (2017).

Then, we would say that, if there were a dispute over this large majority of political concepts, it would be essentially due to conceptual confusion, meaning that, for some kind of methodological error, we are not able to distinguish, properly, concurrent meanings, or to apply the concept properly to political reality. Hence, if we treated these concepts as essentially contested, we would not only justify conceptual confusion in an improper way, but we would also obstruct the possibility of solving it by conceptual analysis. Two different sets of problems need to be addressed here:

1) firstly, and foremost, curiously enough, how we should consider normative disagreements in political theory is essentially contested (Carter 2015). Some scholars, like William Connolly (Connolly 1993) or Ronald Dworkin (Dworkin 1996), think that conceptual disputes over political concepts, entangling together the normative and the descriptive plan, are the core issue of political theory and, therefore, all political concepts are, per definition, contested. Other scholars, like Giovanni Sartori (Sartori 1970) and Felix Oppenheim (Oppheneim 1981), counter that these disputes are due to conceptual confusion and that the meaning of political concepts should be established in a value independent way. I hold a position somewhere in the middle between the two. For, I believe that there are in fact few essentially contested concepts in which we are unable to disentangle the normative and the conceptual level, like 'democracy' or 'justice'; but also, that the large majority of political concepts, like 'populism', is not contested in that sense and that in this case the main source of disagreement is definitely methodological;

2) a second kind of problems is that, independently from which side we take into this quarrel, I believe we should agree that the essentially contested framework must not be used as a *passe-partout* for legitimizing conceptual confusion and ambiguity in political science. For, over the years, essentially contentedness has become as a wildcard played anytime we have trouble in solving some conceptual dispute. This use of contestedness is problematic because it jeopardizes the very possibility of a rigorous political theory and, particularly, overlooks the role of methodological issues in generating conceptual disputes. The importance of conceptual clarification in political studies is thus set aside.

sostituirei qui con 1), 2) ecc. per uniformità con altri elenchi nel testo

In conclusion, I hold that the essentially contested framework could be used, as a last resort, only in few particular cases in which conceptual disputes involve deep political and moral convictions and not every time we come across a disagreement over the definition of a concept. Then, independently from our view about normative disagreement in political theory, we should not screen conceptual confusion behind the shield of essentially contested concepts. For, any assessment of the contested nature of a concept, without any previous analysis of the conceptual structure, will be like putting the cart before the horse. To avoid it, we need to firmly distinguish the structure of concepts, that is the way in which we put together words and real objects, from their normative implications. Consequently, before granting the contested nature of a concept, we must exclude methodological errors of any kind.

3. Political theory as conceptual engineering

Simon Blackburn, in the opening of his *Think: A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*, characterizes philosophers as conceptual engineers: "for just as the engineer studies the structure of material things, so the philosopher studies the structure of thought". More precisely,

> understanding the structure involves seeing how parts function and how they interconnect. It means knowing what would happen for better or worse if changes were made. This is what we aim at, when we investigate the structures that shape our view of the world. Our concepts or ideas form the mental housing in which we live. We may end up proud of the structures we have built. Or we may believe that they need dismantling and starting afresh. But first, we need to know what they are (Blackburn 1999, 2).

This way of understanding philosophy as engineering is, in my opinion, a promising way to face all those situations in which a too harsh conceptual disagreement due to methodological confusion blocks a productive use of the concept. By analyzing the structure of concepts, in fact, political thinkers could not only ascertain if there is any methodological issue making scholars talking one past the other but, also, improving the descriptive and explicative power of these same concepts. For, engineer-

ing models are blueprints of buildings, mapping all the parts and their relations in order to predict their reaction to many kinds of potential stimuli, like earthquakes, and to make the proper corrections. Similarly, then, conceptual models should be able to map the very structure of concepts, that is the way in which they are constructed and in which they are related to reality and to other concepts.

Starting from the very basics, then, we will say that concepts are the bricks every inquiry and argument in political theory are made of. The mainstream view is that concepts are words we use as labels for real world objects. More precisely, each of these labels is seen as standing for a set, called the extension, containing from zero to n real objects. Arguments and theories in political science, then, are materially made of words standing for concepts and for relations between concepts. In their turn, these words/concepts are related to real world processes: the stricter is the relation between concepts and real phenomena, the more arguments and theories involving them will have explicative and descriptive power, because these kinds of arguments and theories are reliable and useful as long as they mimic real politics. To guarantee that this is the case, we need, among other things, to guarantee that each concept composing these theories and arguments indicates always, more or less, the same set of objects. If a concept doesn't, we say that it is ambiguous. We call a concept ambiguous, then, any time it is used as a tag for two or more different sets of real objects. The worst scenario is when this kind of inconsistency occurs within the same argument or theory; in this case, we say that the argument – or theory – is flawed, because it basically draws connections between things that do not belong together in the real world. More frequently, the variation occurs between arguments proposed by different scholars. In this case, we have a debate where scholars talks about different sets of objects by using the same word tag. The effect will be as if they were talking past each other, instead of having a genuine discussion about something. I call this phenomenon 'conceptual confusion'. In order to prevent conceptual confusion we can perform what I called 'conceptual engineering'. In other words, we should analyze the ambiguous concept to see if there is any issue in its structure preventing it from mimicking political reality with a high level of fidelity or if there are problems in the way in which the concept relates with other concepts inside arguments and theories.

One of the main sources of confusion is 'conceptual mishmash'. With this expression, I mean the implicit adoption of different frameworks by different political scholars to construct their definitions of a concept anew. In this way, a scholar provides a definition of a concept C formulated as an ideal type, whereas another provides a definition of the same concept C in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. After doing so, they throw their proposal into the mix, free of any methodological specification about the structural tools they used. It is clear that by comparing the ideal type with a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, we are just comparing apples and oranges. And it is even more problematic if we do so without knowing it. In fact, we should be aware that the choice we make about the kind of definition we adopt will not be neutral towards the final result. In fact, this choice determines:

1) the way in which the concept interacts with wider theories and bordering concepts (and vice versa);
2) the way in which the internal elements of a concept relate together;
3) the way the concept 'carves nature at its joints' (Sider 2010), that is the way in which the concept relates to the real world and, therefore, the number and the kind of real objects that we find into its extension;
4) the way in which we interact with the concept, because we will hardly consider in the same way a prototype of democracy, like an ideal model of democracy, and a minimal standard for democracy, like free elections.

In order to avoid any conceptual mishmash, a first general suggestion is that scholars should be very careful when they enter a debate with a new proposal of definition shaped with a new conceptual structure. More precisely, I think they should always highlight their choice about conceptual structure, even if this could jeopardise the possibility of comparison and integration between the various positions in the field. For, as I said, we cannot compare ideal types with classic definitions so easily. To make this comparison easier, however, I think that a good strategy could be the adoption of a pluralist position including in it all the main theories of concept construction, and working as a map of concepts. From this map, scholars can choose a different kind of definition depending

on their research aim: if they want to distinguish what makes a country democratic they will use a minimal definition, whereas if they are trying to compare two democratic countries they will use an ideal type. At the same time, however, thanks to the pluralist nature of our map, we will be able to compare the various proposal on the table, neutralizing the potential confusion generated by their different conceptual assumptions from start. This pluralist approach will avoid the "conceptual mishmash" problem and allow a free and fair debate between the various positions. To put together this pluralist approach, in the remainder of this paper, I will look into the literature about the methodology of political theory and political science. In fact, each definition is grounded onto different philosophical understandings of what political concepts are and of how they should be treated. Therefore, if we want to make our proposal truly pluralist we will need to include, somehow, all these understandings.

4. *Reconstructivism vs ordinary language philosophy*

As said before, concepts are labels we attach to real objects. More precisely, they are collections of – individually necessary and jointly sufficient – conditions that must occur all at once for the concept to apply to a given state of affairs. In other words, to be included in the extension, an object must possess all the features contained in the collection (the definition of the concept or 'the intension').

The most famous formulation of this view is the so called 'reconstructivism': a theory advocated by Giovanni Sartori (1984) and Felix Oppenheim (1981) in the late 1970es and stating that scholars should 'reconstruct' concepts any time the meaning seems to be somehow confused or unclear. This reconstruction implies the elimination of all the internal ambiguities of a concept by unpacking its constituting elements and tracking them down to real objects. This idea is somehow inspired by old-school logical positivism, as the one contained in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus*, as explicitly declared by both Sartori and Oppenheim. In this book, Wittgenstein is categorical about the way we should treat ambiguities in philosophy: "In order to avoid such errors we must make use of a sign-language that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols and by not using in a superficially similar way signs that have dif-

ferent modes of signification" (Wittgenstein 2001, 18). Then, in adopting a concept into their academic work, political theorists ought to be extremely accurate about its definition precisely in order to avoid ambiguity, vagueness and all the implicit evaluative contents. Technical language, then, should be distinguished from everyday language by the absence of evaluative contents, by the presence of crisp conceptual boundaries and by the fact that to each term corresponds only one meaning. To reach this result, Sartori proposes a three step procedure of reconstruction: "first collect a representative set of definitions; second, extract their characteristics; and third, construct matrixes that organize such characteristics meaningfully". This procedure of conceptual analysis is aimed to extract the set of characteristics that are essential to define a concept, from the chaos made of all the many characteristics that may have been accidentally associated to it. Sartori calls these essential characteristics 'defining properties'. We, then, organize these defining properties in a 'minimal definition' that should be parsimonious and adequate: "adequate in that it contains enough characteristics to identify the referents and their boundaries; parsimonious in that no accompanying property is included among the necessary defining properties" (Sartori 1984, 56). The procedure, then, starts with the collection of the more representative definitions from the academic literature. After that, we unpack these definitions in their constituent elements, looking for any recurring property. Every time we find that a property is present in all the definitions, we mark it as a 'defining property'. The set of all the defining properties, that are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for a concept to apply to a given state of affairs, is called 'the conceptual core' or, as we were saying few line above, 'the minimal definition'.

Sartori's procedure of conceptual reconstruction, in conclusion, is one of the simplest and most effective ways to clarify political concepts fostering coherence and reliability. For, definitions obtained with this method are simple, short and apt to establish clear conceptual boundaries. This is why, probably, it became to be considered the mainstream model, even if very rarely used in its pure form. For, Sartori's proposal presents two main problems:

1) Definitions of this kind are not usually representative of the real use of concepts. In fact, they often result in an oversimplification of an otherwise complex semantic field. Minimal definitions rule

out, with their crisp boundaries, a lot of nuances that are, however, present in the everyday use of political concepts. As we will see in the next paragraph, this problem has been addressed by ordinary language theorists.

2) Besides, Sartori's approach is too formal, because it is completely focused on semantics and does not account for the relation existing between concepts and reality. For, it is not clear how defining properties are related to real states of affairs in some measurable way. As we will see in the next section, scholars address this problem by connecting properties with indicators, that are real world measurable features standing for abstract properties into real states of affairs.

During the years, the standard model has been challenged and/or integrated by alternative models of conceptualization. The main philosophical source of these alternative models of conceptualization is ordinary language philosophy. On this side of the fence, then, we find scholars like Hanna Pitkin (1972) and William Connolly (1993) proposing a completely alternative model of concepts. Curiously enough, this position too originated from Wittgenstein's work. Following late Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1958), Pitkin questions the very idea of concepts as 'labels' attached to real objects and the fact that these labels, together, can construct a reliable image of the world. On the contrary, for ordinary-language theorists, concepts are tools that we use in our everyday lives to interact one with the other, in what Wittgenstein famously calls 'linguistic games'. This means that the meaning of a concept cannot be reduced to a short number of characteristics connecting objects to a term (as in the reconstructivist view) but, instead, should be best represented by a list of all the exemplary uses of that term inside real life situations. In the *Blue and Brown Books*, Wittgenstein explains that conceptual confusion is due to the fact that every time someone "sees a law in the way a word is used and trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results" (Wittgenstein 1958, 25). Pitkin calls "craving for generality" the desire for order and coherence in the meaning of concepts that make us unsatisfied with the inconsistencies we find between the various usages. However, for Wittgenstein, these paradoxical results are, at the end of the day, not paradoxical at all. In fact, we will see these outcomes as paradoxical

only if we take concepts to be labels entangled to objects by a coherent and constant relation of some kind. But, in Wittgenstein's view, concepts assume a particular meaning only when they are used by a speaker into a specific context, otherwise they are, per definition, vague and ambiguous. Now, these contexts are hypothetically infinite, because they are determined by social reality (Wittgenstein uses the expression 'forms of life') and not established once and for all. Then, the lack of coherence between the various uses of a concept and the vagueness of any generic definition are perfectly normal and acceptable consequences, coming from the fact we were looking at a concept out of context (in Wittgenstein's words, in these cases the language is 'idling'). In this view, then, there is no need for conceptual reconstruction, because ambiguity and vagueness, instead of problems in need of a solution, are characteristics of every concept, when it is not used in a definite linguistic context.

Following this view, the work of political theorists will be, fundamentally, a matter of collecting together documented usages of concepts and specifying the different contexts related to each particular usage. The output, then, will be more like a map of the use of a particular concept more than a definition as we usually intend it. For, it will be something like a list of uses and definitions without any kind of coherence bar a vague family resemblance. This is evidently problematic because, as noted by John Gerring:

> Definitions are collected, usages reviewed and meanings parsed, but Humpty Dumpty is left on the ground. If ordinary language analysis is to facilitate empirical analysis by elucidating usable concepts, then we must make an effort to put Humpty Dumpty back together again (Gerring, Barresi 2003).

Out of the metaphor, family resemblances are almost useless for any practical use. In order to put back together Humpty Dumpty without losing the plurality of uses and meanings, over the years, scholars developed the idea of a "maximal definition" (Collier, Mahon 1993). Very generically, maximal definitions work as the set of the features that may occur in a state of affairs, whenever it is a case of a given concept, let's say democracy. This means that these features may or may not occur in a given state of affairs, but, if any of them do, then, the state of affairs will be somehow connected to the concept of democracy and we should look

for the presence of all the other features contained in the maximal defini-
tion of democracy. The perfect case of democracy should present all the
attributes together, thus outlining the 'ideal type'; however, more often,
we will find that the features occur fewer in number: the more features
we have, the more a real case will resemble the ideal type of democracy.
Maximal definitions, then, are very useful to rank real occurrences of a
concept; i.e. using a maximal definition of democracy as an ideal type
we can rank cases of democratic countries, from the more democratic to
the less democratic. However, since there are no necessary conditions in
maximal definitions, it might very well happen that two different states
of affairs, x and y, present, each, the same number n of attributes, and yet
they do not share common attributes. In such a case, we end up in the
paradoxical situation in which different states of affairs are subsumed
under the same concept without sharing any common feature.

For this reason, among others, maximal definitions have never really
challenged the mainstream position of the given view. Besides, they do
not provide a clear conceptual boundary to concepts and they are too
long and complicated. This is particularly problematic in cases of deep
conceptual disagreement between scholars, because, potentially, we
may add an endless number of categories to the definition of our con-
cept that, meanwhile, will gradually loose cogency and coherence to the
point of becoming a catch-all word. Furthermore, maximal definitions
are not easy to be handled, because, whereas standard definitions are
almost self evident, maximal definitions require a lot of metatheoretical
explanatory work. In fact, whenever we ask for a definition of a concept,
we expect to receive a small list of characteristics that must occur for a
state of affairs to be considered an occurrence of that concept.

5. A *pluralist procedure for constructing political concepts*

After what said in the previous section, we can easily conclude that both
minimal and maximal definitions have their pros and cons depending
on the context of application. For instance, minimal definitions are very
useful whenever we need to set a clear boundary to a concept's exten-
sion because they provide the minimal requirements for a state of affairs
to be considered an occurrence of that concept. On the contrary, max-

imal definitions will be at their best when it comes to sort real cases depending on their stricter or wider adherence to an ideal model. To do so, in fact, we will need to compare each real case to a set of attributes working as an ideal type and to sort them, depending on how many elements they share with that ideal type. Meanwhile, minimal definitions will very likely cause a loss in term of nuances and in term of details, because they will divide real objects using a black and white logic: either an object, in fact, belong to the extension of a concept or it does not. On the contrary, maximal definitions will provide a gradated scale by means of which real objects are considered as belonging to the extension in different degrees. Consider, for example, UK and Thailand as instances of democracy. Using a minimal definition of democracy like "a country that regularly held free elections", both will be equally assigned to the set of democratic countries, whereas if we use a maximal definition of democracy, listing many attributes (as in the case of the Democracy Index[7]), we see that UK and Thailand will score very differently in the ranking of democratic countries.

Now, it seems clear to me that neither of the two models of definition is the best for every state of affairs and contexts. Sometimes we may need to rank real cases and other times we may just want to sort them using a crisp division. At the end of the day, which is best totally depends on our research aims and needs. For this reason, I propose to adopt a pluralist approach and that, consequently, to provide both a minimal and a maximal definition of every political concept. In this choice, I follow John Gerring's proposal of a 'min-max strategy' of conceptual reconstruction. This pretty awkward name is motivated by Gerring's attempt to provide a way of bringing together the accuracy of maximal definitions in mapping concept usages with the clarity and simplicity of minimal definitions. More precisely, Gerring's intent is to sketch a blueprint of concepts that may be used as a guidance to avoid endless disagreements about meaning. In fact, once in possession of this blueprint, scholars will eventually be able to find all the needed materials to build up their own definitions of the concept and to understand how they are related with the others'. Moreover, the blueprint will map the many different relations occurring

---

[7] https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.

between neighboring concepts like intersections, partial-synonymy, contrariness, etc. Clearly, this map will have a mostly irregular shape because of the irregular nature of concepts' usage; in Gerring words:

> rather than a pyramid of terms, the min-max strategy established an irregularly structured two dimensional space in which terms inhabit more or less fixed locations. Meanings overlap but are never perfectly synonymous. (…) The two dimensional space is mapped by minimal and maximal definitions - the former establishing an outer ring, and the latter establishing an inner ring for each concept. Between these two extremes a concept's interpretation fluctuates but without losing its essential meaning (Gerring, Barresi 2003, 225).

Basically, Gerring proposes a procedure that brings together elements of Sartori's and Pitkin's procedures. The procedure is made of three steps: 1) sampling usages and definitions; 2) typologizing attributes, 3) constructing minimal and maximal definitions.

1) The first step is more or less an enhanced replica of Sartori's literature review. The most significant difference with Sartori's model is that Gerring's survey includes ordinary usages of concepts. In fact, for Gerring "usages may bring to light meanings that are not contained in formal definitions, perhaps because they are so obvious, and may clarify meanings when formal definitions are vague. Usage also entails discussion of the referents of a concept, which cannot be reasonably segregated from its formal definitions" (Gerring, Barresi 2003, 206). Then, we start by going through the various usages and definitions of a concept until we find completely inconsistent uses as in the case of 'pen' (writing instrument) and 'pen' (enclosure). Meanwhile we group together similar usages and definitions choosing the more representative one as a tag for each group. We stop sampling in the moment we see that definitional attributes and usages begin to repeat.

2) Typologizing means that we construct a chart listing the various attributes we sampled so far. To do so, we firstly unpack usages and definitions in their constitutive elements to obtain minimal particles, like nouns or adjectives, or minimal sentences made of noun + verb or adjective + verb or noun + adjective etc. Then, we

group together the synonyms and similar expressions like (Gerring's example): 'social', 'learned', 'non-natural', 'is a heritage', 'traditional', 'extra-genetic', 'extra-somatic', 'outside-the-skin', 'extrinsic' etc. that will be all subsumed and tagged in the chart under the most inclusive attribute of 'social'. As pointed out by Gerring, the choice of a tag for each group of terms and expressions is largely arbitrary. However, we may argue that some terms are more likely to be used as labels than others: for instance, 'social' is a better choice than 'outside-the-skin' or 'is a heritage', because it is simpler, more inclusive, more common, etc.

3) With this list of attributes in hands, we proceed to construct a minimal and a maximal definition. Minimal definitions are made of the few attributes shared by the various definitions. In Gerring's words "they identify the bare essentials of a concept, sufficient to bound it extensionally while maintaining all non-idiosyncratic meanings associated with the term" (Gerring, Barresi 2003, 207). On the contrary, maximal definitions are collections of all the attributes associated to a concept in a meaningful way.

At the end of this procedure, we end up with two definitions of the same concept that could be used in different research contexts depending on our needs. Now, with these two definitions in hands, we are able to establish boundaries to conceptual variation in a way that, meanwhile, will preserve a certain level of internal incoherence. This is, in my opinion, a good compromise between the two diverging needs of having a handy and simple definition, on one side, and having an accurate and exhaustive map of concepts' usage on the other. In particular, minimal definitions will establish the outer boundaries, distinguishing our concept from the neighboring others, whereas maximal definitions will provide a list of attributes that, following Sartori's method, would have been overlooked under the indiscriminate label of "accompanying properties". These attributes, in fact, could be shared with other concepts and, therefore, could be a useful way to map inter-conceptual relations or to rank real world cases from the most to less similar to the maximal definition. For instance, liberal democracy will be the intersection between the concept of democracy and the concept of liberalism and this is why, in this intersection, we will find very likely attributes like 'freedom of speech'

and 'free enterprise' that will appear in the maximal definitions of the two concepts.

In his *Social Science Methodology*: *A Criterial Framework* (Gerring 2001), Gerring adds a 'cumulative' definition to his min-max strategy. Cumulative definitions are, very roughly, obtained by ranking all the attributes we find (at least once) associated to a concept from the more essential to the less essential. With this operation, Gerring's aim is to add a further and more fine-grained criterion for structuring the gradated scale we use to establish the degree in which a real case approximates the maximal definition. The problem with this kind of definitions, in fact, is that all attributes are equivalent and, therefore, it happens very often that two cases may present the same number of attributes without sharing any attribute between them. In the previous section, we called this particular situation 'family resemblance' and we saw how it is slightly problematic. Now, cumulative definitions allow us to specify which attributes are more essential for a concept: starting from the more essential attributes, proceeding downwards, we will find progressively less essential ones. Then, given two real states of affairs presenting, both, the same number of attributes from the maximal definition, we will be able to establish which one resembles more and which one less the definition, depending on how many 'more essential' attributes each of them presents. In conclusion, this seems to me a very promising way to rank real states of affairs in a more fine-grained way than the one allowed by the basic version of maximal definition. Gerring's proposal is that we count the number of occurrences of an attribute in the academic literature and in the ordinary use of a given concept to establish its degree of "essentiality": the many occurrences we find, the highest we will rank the attribute into the cumulative definition. In conclusion, I propose that we intend maximal definitions only in this 'cumulative' sense.

A last question, that need to be answered, is how we make room for the relation between the two definitions and political reality in our proposal. I will use, for this purpose, a contribution from Gerry Goertz's *Social Science Concepts*. *A User Guide* (Goertz 2006). In this book, Goertz proposes a multilevel and multidimensional framework for concepts. In his own words:

> Sartori developed a semantic and definitional approach to concepts. In contrast my approach is ontological, realist and causal. The core

attributes of a concept constitute a *theory* of the *ontology* of the phenomenon under consideration. *Concepts are about ontology*. To develop a concept is more than providing a definition: it is deciding what is important about an entity" (Goertz 2006, 27-28).

Despite his criticisms of Sartori's approach, Goertz keeps the fundamental structure from Sartori's framework and tries to reformulate it using a more empirical and realistic imprint. For Goertz, then, multilevel concepts are supposed to refer to states of affairs in the real world that can be seen through different levels of abstraction, from the purely theoretical idea (e.g. 'freedom') to the more empirical and contextualized index measuring the incidence of a given concept into a real state of affaires (e.g. 'world press freedom ranking' from Reporters Without Borders[8]). The number of these levels may vary from two (a term and its extension) to infinite. However, for sake of simplicity, Goertz limits this number to three:

1) B*asic level* considers the concept as a term or a family of terms appearing in theoretical propositions and theories.
2) S*econdary level* is made of different attributes that Goertz calls *dimensions*. Dimensions/attributes are properties characterizing the concept. These attributes can be organized using the minimal or the maximal definition.
3) E*mpirical level* is made of indicators and indexes. Indicators are measurable features that, if detected in a real world situation determines whether an attribute of the concept occurs. An index is a structured set of indicators. How are attributes related with indicators? Goertz constructs a complex systems made of two fundamental inter-level relations: causality and ontological relations. Causality connects together causes and effects between levels. For example, imagine that 'situation of crisis' were a constitutive attribute of the concept of 'revolution'; well, then, we would say that the attribute of 'situation of crisis' is a cause for the basic level term 'revolution'. Similarly, it goes between indicators and the terms we find at the basic level. In fact, a given value of, let's say, 'individual income' can be the indicator

---

[8] https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology.

connected to the attribute of 'poverty' and also the cause of both 'poverty' and, if 'poverty' is an attribute of 'revolution', of 'revolution'. Causal relations are, then, for Goertz, in many cases, the mainstream and unconscious criterion shaping the structure of concepts. However, this implies that, when scholars structure concepts this way, they are embedding a causal theory into them without realizing it. By causal theory, Goertz means a specific distribution of causal powers inside a concept. Such a theory will clearly interfere with the way a concept interacts, causally, with other concepts and this means, in turn, that the interactions between the various concepts are pre-determined by some kind of unconscious choice. Since causal relations between concepts are the very subject matter of many theories and arguments in social sciences, if we leave them to unconscious choices like these, we take the risk of impoverishing social sciences and creating another potential source of conceptual confusion. To avoid this bad end, Goertz proposes that we use ontological relations – that he defines as non-causal relations between objects that are positioned on different levels of reality – instead of causal relations to connect the various levels. To make an example: the concept of welfare state is made of old age pensions, health care, workers' safeguards and unemployment compensation. There is no causal relation between any of these attributes and the broader concept of welfare state but, still, they seem to be connected by a 'being a constitutive element of' the relation. This means that all these attributes should be seen as constitutive parts of a broader concept without, necessarily, any causal relation connecting them with elements from other levels. Ontological relations provide, then, a way to connect concepts and reality without embedding implicit causal theories inside these same concepts.

6. Mapping political concepts

To sum up, over the years, different models of conceptualization have been used by political scholars. Basically, all these models can be summarized in two fundamental kinds of definitions:

1) Minimal definitions are collections of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that must occur all at once for the

concept to apply to a given state of affairs. These definitions are useful to clearly distinguish objects to which the concept apply legitimately from objects to which it doesn't.

2) Maximal definitions are a list of n features that an object may or may not possess, in a number that may vary between 0 and n. The more features from that list the object presents, the more it will resemble the ideal type, that is the set of all the n features. These definitions do not set clear cut boundaries between objects as minimal definitions do, but, rather, rank real world phenomena using the degree of similarity as a criterion. Moreover, in my proposal, the attributes in the maximal definition will be ranked from the less to the more essential to the concept, following Gerring's proposal of 'cumulative definition'.

Since we cannot easily compare the two models of definition, my proposal is to adopt a pluralist approach to concepts putting together the maximal and the minimal definition of each concept. This means that each concept should be defined using two definitions instead of one and that, depending on the research context, scholars can choose to use one definition or another. Then, again, each new proposal of definition for a concept should include both a minimal and a maximal definition. These two definitions will provide a map for the scholars of the many different usages of a concept and, at the same time, will, also, provide an easy-to-handle minimal definition that will be able to clearly distinguish that concept from neighboring concepts. Our conceptual map, then, can be very useful in:

1) preventing further conceptual confusion, by providing scholars with a clear list of attributes that can be associated with the concept and, therefore, acting as guidance binding any new use or definition to some kind of canvas;

2) reducing the actual confusion by providing a clear way to distinguish the meaning (or the meanings) of a concept from the meaning (or the meanings) of other neighboring concepts;

3) mapping all the relations between this concept and other concepts in order to predict how it will behave inside arguments and broader theories;

4) providing a clear set of conditions that may or must occur into real world states of affairs to be considered as, somehow, related with our concept;

5) finally, this map will allow scholars to use political concepts without loosing too many nuances but, also, without getting lost in endless debates over their definition.

Now, a potential line of critique to my proposal argues that the same result of sheltering political theory from conceptual confusion could be, far more simply, achieved by using stipulative definitions instead of descriptive definitions. In fact, until now, I considered only definitions that are, basically, descriptions of reality and I completely avoided to discuss stipulative definitions. Stipulative definitions are a particular kind of definitions that "imparts a meaning to the defined term, and involves no commitment that the assigned meaning agrees with prior uses (if any) of the term"(Gupta 2021). This particular kind of definitions is very useful when it comes to define a brand new concept and can, indeed, be, if properly managed, helpful in sheltering empirical and theoretical works from conceptual disputes, for it, basically, doesn't take into consideration previous uses of the concept. Someone, then, might object that, by using stipulative definitions, we should be able to avoid conceptual confusion without the otherwise complex conceptual structure I'm introducing in this paper. A first answer to this proposal is that this might be true only if we took single academic works in isolation. This means that, for the purpose of a single research, conceptual confusion could be left out by stipulating a specific meaning for a specific concept. Clearly, this works as long as we keep our research sheltered from the ongoing debate over that political concept. For, the very moment we publish our research, someone will surely point out that the definition we stipulated for the concept does not reflect the state of the art of the academic debate. Automatically, we will be brought back into the conceptual dispute we were trying to avoid, with a high possibility of being forced to drop the stipulative definition or, at least, to make it more consistent with the ongoing debate. Either way we will be back in the conceptual confusion for which we designed our pluralist approach. In conclusion, my opinion is that the use of stipulative definitions should be carefully weighed and limited to very specific cases because of its side effects. In fact, since a stipulative definition is, ideally, completely independent from any previous definition of a concept, it is as if the meaning of that concept were conceived under some kind of veil of ignorance, shielding the theorist from any prior use of it. This means that

any scholar adopting a stipulative definition will be basically inventing a new concept and this will be problematic whenever it comes to confront his or her results with other scholars. Morever, as pointed out by Schaffer, it is very unlikely for political scholars to invent new terms, since we are basically debating over terms like democracy, freedom, socialism, communism, that have been around for centuries or over terms that have been invented by others in the public debate (Schaffer 1998). A less demanding version of stipulative definition, however, could be easily made consistent with my proposal. Basically, I think that if we define stipulative definitions as the arbitrary choice of one or more meanings from the conceptual space delimited by our pluralist definition, then, I think that stipulative definitions could be perfectly integrated in my proposal. This, in turn, will avoid conceptual confusion because the stipulative definition will be coherent with the conceptual map we provided with our pluralist definition.

In conclusion, even if this problem may seem a minor issue for political scholars, compared to more important normative disputes and causal arguments, I think it should not be underestimated. In fact, methodological issues are important for both normative and causal arguments, because ambiguities or incorrect usages of some sort can jeopardize or reduce significantly their validity. For, an argument adopting a confused concept is tremendously less effective than an argument that use a clear and well-built definition. Theoretical and meta-theoretical questions, like the ones I tried to solve into my paper, then, are preliminary for any attempt of constructing valid arguments involving political concepts.

References

Blackburn S. (1999), *Think. A Compelling Introduction to Philosophy*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. p. 2.

Bryan F., Matheson J. (2019), "Disagreement", in N.E. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Cappelen H. (2018), *Fixing Language. An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press.

Carter I. (2015), "Value-freeness and Value-neutrality in the Analysis of Political Concepts", *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy*, vol. 1, pp. 279-306.

Christensen D., Lackey J. (2013), *The Epistemology of Disagreement. New Essays.* New York - Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Collier D., Hidalgo F.D., Maciuceanu A.O. (2006), "Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 11, n. 3, pp. 211-246.

Collier D., Mahon J.E. (1993), "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited. Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 87, n. 4, pp. 845-855.

Connolly W.E. (1993³), *The Terms of Political Discourse*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Dworkin R. (1996), "Objectivity of Truth: You'd Better Believe It", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 25, pp. 87-139.

Gallie W.B. (1956), "Essentially Contested Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol.56, pp. 167-198.

Gerring J. (2001), *Social Science Methodology: A Criterial Framework*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge University Press.

Gerring J., Barresi P.A. (2003), "Putting ordinary language at work"', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, vol. 15, n. 2, pp. 201-232.

Goertz G. (2006). *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Gupta A. (2021), "Definitions", in N.E. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Held D. (2006), *Models of Democracy Third Edition*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Kaltvasser C., Taggart P., Ochoa Espeio P., Ostiguy Pierre (eds) (2017), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Kazin M. (1998), *The Populist Persuasion: An American History*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press.

McMahon (2009), *Reasonable Disagreement. A Theory of Political Morality*, Cambridge (UK), Cambridge Universtity Press.

Mudde C. (2004), "The Populist *Zeitgeit*", *Government & Opposition*, vol. 39, n. 3, pp. 541-563.

Oppenheim F.E. (1981), *Political Concepts. A Reconstruction*, Chicago, Chicago University Press.

Pitkin H.F. (1972), *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Sartori G. (1970), "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics", *American Political Science Review*, vol. 64, n. 4, pp. 1033-1053.

– (1984), "Guidelines for Concept Analysis", in G. Sartori, *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*, Beverly Hills, Sage, pp. 15-48.

Schaffer F.C. (1998), *Why Don't Political Scientists Coin More New Terms?*, Paper delivered at the Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association in Boston (MA).

Sider T. (2010), *Writing the Book of the World*, New York - Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Swanton C. (1985), "On the 'Essential Contestedness' of Political Concepts", *Ethics*, vol. 95, n. 4, pp. 811-827.

Waldron J. (2002), "Is the Rule of Law an Essentially Contested Concept (in Florida)?", *Law and Philosophy*, n. 21, pp. 137-164.

Weyland K. (2001), "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, n. 1, pp. 1-22.

Wittgenstein L. (1958), *Philosophical Investigations* [1953], trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, New York, MacMillan.

– (2001), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1961], trans. by D.F. Pears, B.F. McGuinness, New York, Routledge.