Concepts
in World
Politics

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Unpacking Concepts

Felix Berenskoetter

Like everyone else, scholars of international relations use concepts to make sense of what they look at and to have conversation about it. While it is common to portray academic inquiry into world politics as exploring a set of salient issues with the help of a range of theories, concepts are central to this undertaking as they enable us to intellectually frame issues and formulate theories in the first place. They are devices we use to order and make sense of a messy reality by reducing its complexity and naming and giving meaning to its features; they provide mental shortcuts through which we navigate and grasp the world by allowing us to cluster, classify and categorize everything we encounter into something manageable and meaningful. In doing so, concepts guide thought and provide a language that enables scholars to communicate their theoretical arguments and empirical findings. And by guiding thought, concepts also guide action.

Most of the time, we take the meaning of our concepts for granted. Of course, we know that our conceptual language is an invention and that the meaning of key terms is not carved in stone. We are aware that a particular concept may be interpreted differently and we have seen insightful explorations of concepts prominent in the discipline of International Relations (IR), many of them covered and cited in this volume. However, existing studies dedicated to opening up concepts and showing their complexity tend to be highly specialized and rarely explore a range of concepts side by side (for a recent exception, see Adler-Nissen 2013). Moreover, these studies are only reluctantly acknowledged, let alone integrated in mainstream conversations. Usually concepts tend to be reduced to static "variables", which are broken down into "indicators", without taking into account the rich history and multiple meanings of the concept underpinning the variable.[1] The reasons for this range from the modern belief

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[1] As Giovanni Sartori (1970) observed over four decades ago, missing reflection on concepts is especially prevalent in quantitative research.

that we actually can arrive at the true meaning of a concept, which is singular and simple, to the more pragmatic view that opening up concepts sows unnecessary confusion and goes against their very purpose of reducing complexity. And so we usually resort to an authoritative definition that settles the matter by quoting a well-known scholar who presumably thought about the matter carefully and whose definition is popular and/or makes intuitive sense. Having fixed the meaning of our concept (or so we believe) we go on with our research.

But we cannot ignore the fact that behind each concept lurk multiple meanings that have evolved over time and space, are embedded in different theoretical frameworks and empirical expressions, and are displayed in political and public discourses and action (Connolly 1993). As students and scholars, we need to spend some time thinking about these various manifestations and how they affect our research. And so, whereas most IR textbooks focus on "issues" and "theories" without paying much attention to the multifaceted nature of concepts, this volume takes this task head on. Specifically, it has three aims. First, it seeks to display multiple meanings of a concept across historical, theoretical and cultural contexts to make students sensitive to the openness and contestedness of concepts and to processes of meaning creation. Second, it seeks to highlight the role concepts play in scholarly research and in political decision-making to remind students of the analytical and practical consequences of using a concept in one way rather than another. Third, by showcasing different ways of unpacking concepts and discussing their contingency and performativity, the volume hopes to make students familiar with different approaches to concept analysis and their potential for investigating world politics. In other words, the objective is to improve awareness of the historical evolution(s) and plural meaning(s) of key terms, to encourage critical and productive engagement with key concepts and to demonstrate how concept analysis contributes to an analysis of politics.

The study of concepts has long been prominent among historians and philosophers and has never been absent from IR, yet over the last two decades it has gained in prominence. Despite the stubborn resistance in some quarters, it has become increasingly difficult for IR scholars to ignore that our perception of and engagement with the world is structured by language(s) and that we need to pay more attention to how this affects political action and research. Specifically, two related developments make an engagement with concepts unavoidable. First, constructivist angles inspired by, above all, the linguistic turn have relentlessly pushed for a more critical attitude towards the categories and terminologies we use and the mentalities behind them. Disillusioned with grand theories as analytical devices, scholars now increasingly organize their research and, indeed, research communities around key concepts like security (Buzan and Hansen 2009; Bourbeau 2015), gender (Tickner 1992; Steans 2013) and, most recently, practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Ringmar 2014). Second, there is a sense that we are living through a period of social and geopolitical transformation, entering a world with late-modern features accompanied by challenges to structures of Western dominance that have shaped the IR discipline since its inception. While these changes are experienced differently depending on one's position, they often make established concepts feel out-dated, prompting modifications and even inventions of new concepts. This can be witnessed in the formation

of new terms like globalization (Held et al. 1999) and the re-reading of old ones like war (Kaldor 2012), as well as the broader critique of Eurocentric speaking and thinking and the corresponding emergence of and search for "non-Western" voices (Tickner and Blaney 2012; Hobson 2012), and the recovery of long-neglected concepts like race (Vucetic 2015).

The main objective of this introductory chapter is to assist reflection on how we might "unpack" a concept. It thus is broadly methodological in character by laying out key parameters of concept analysis and providing an overview of three different approaches, called here "historical", "scientific" and "political(critical)". My hope is that offering these general frameworks will serve both as a useful background when reading individual chapters and as analytical guidance for those wishing to unpack concepts themselves. They also flow from my experience on how this book developed. When inviting the authors to join the project, I asked for contributions showing the plural/complex meanings of a given concept as well as its use/performance in world politics. At that stage, I did not provide much guidance as to how this might be done, assuming that my colleagues had an approach at hand. Yet, I soon realized that few of us, including myself, had thought carefully about the methodological aspects of "unpacking" a concept or possessed the vocabulary to spell out the analytical approach. So, while I had expected (and welcomed) differences in how authors would deal with their respective concepts, it turned out that the challenges this project faced were not only disagreements about what "concept analysis" actually entails, but also the need to systematically reflect on how and why we unpack our concepts in the first place. In fact, when the question "what is a concept?" was raised at one of our workshops, the room was split between those who thought it would be a good idea to come up with a clear answer and those who argued that doing so would be detrimental to the project. From an editor's perspective, this could be seen as an insurmountable hurdle for constructing a volume that "hangs together". To me, it only affirmed the importance of the project as, hopefully, a contribution to an informed conversation about how we use and study concepts – not only among established scholars but, more importantly, also among students who begin to learn about the subject.

One fundamental issue such a conversation inevitably touches on is the epistemological debate around whether language can provide an accurate description of reality, draw its meaning(s) from or merely invent this reality. Different ways of conceiving of the relationship between word (concept) and world (reality) underpin the tension between positivist and non-positivist perspectives in the social sciences (Smith et al. 1996; Jackson 2011). This division overlaps with two different approaches to knowledge production: the modern view that categorization is necessary for systematic analysis and action and that diligent scholarship can provide objective categories that reflect reality; and a stance combining postmodern and critical sensitivities holding that all concepts/categories are political products, which not only are contingent in meaning but also limit the scope of thought and action. While taking its motivation from the latter position, the spirit of this volume is to leave the matter open, not least because the authors assembled here have their own reading of, and way of navigating through, these debates and the purpose of scholarship.

Parameters of Concept Analysis: Core, Web, Context

Let us begin by looking at the parameters that inform the assumptions and strategies underpinning all scholarly engagement with concepts. While the sequence in which they are discussed here might suggest a movement outwards from the thing itself in concentric circles, it is more accurate to view these parameters as three intertwined dimensions of the same thing.

So, what is a concept? At first sight, there is something paradoxical about defining a concept for a project that seeks to highlight its plurality. But, as will become clear shortly, these two tasks do not necessarily stand in contradiction to each other. In general terms, a concept is an image formed in the human mind that helps us to generate knowledge about the world by organizing, naming and giving meaning to its features. As an abstract heuristic device, it is not considered an accurate representation of reality/the world – regardless of the fundamental question of whether such representation is possible – but, rather, an image which meaningfully organizes this reality/world, perceived through sensory experiences, in the mind. The appeal of a concept is largely pragmatic, namely to enable us to communicate and research this reality/world, although it also owes much to the belief that once we name something we can control it. A concept tends to be attached to a word, although – and this is important – not necessarily always to the same word and, as such, is more than a word. Whereas the meaning of a word points to one particular thing, a concept catches and bundles multiple elements, aspects and experiences and relates them to each other. It would be misleading, though, to simply think of a concept as an umbrella term. Its meaning is not arrived at by simply "adding up" the constituting elements, not least because it is the concept which enables us to organize and make the connections between those "elements". In the words of Reinhart Koselleck, a concept "is not simply indicative of the relations which it covers, it is also a factor within them" (Koselleck 2004 [1979]: 86).

Because concepts contain and bundle many elements and meanings, it is difficult to define them. Indeed, if we understand the purpose of a definition to be fixing meaning, concepts cannot be defined. As Nietzsche famously put it, "only that which has no history can be defined",[2] and as the chapters in this volume show, all concepts have a history. Having said that, only by defining concepts can we move beyond the word to express the concept's constitutive elements and their configuration. Of course, every definition is partial – think, for instance, about the different ways "the state" can be defined. And so we need to look carefully at every definition and ask how and why certain elements and relations are highlighted over others. But even then, defining a concept is only a starting point for its exploration. The mistake is to think that once we have a definition, we have fixed meaning. This is not the case. As Koselleck notes, concepts cannot be given definite meaning, they can only be interpreted (2011 [1972]: 20). Once we look closely, we can see that even a seemingly clear definition of a concept remains vague and ambiguous, allowing for an interpretative space that can contain multiple readings.

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[2] Quoted by Koselleck in his introduction to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (see Koselleck 2011 [1972]).

From recognizing the ambiguity and openness of concepts, it does not follow that we can fill them with whatever meaning we want. The range of elements a concept contains and how they are related is not completely random. Rather, it seems sensible to assume that beneath a particular configuration, each concept has some sort of internal logic, structure, perhaps even properties, which form its core. This core allows us to identify and trace the concept through time and space, especially when attached to different words. That said, this view, often attributed to Socrates and Plato, is not unproblematic. Where does the structure, where do these properties, where does the logic come from? Unless we take the (difficult to defend) position that they are read off nature, they must be an invention of the human mind. But if the internal logic/ structure only exists per human agreement, then how and why do we come to agree (if, indeed, we do)? Even if we have an answer to this question, a second problem arises: the assumption that concepts have intrinsic features comes close to claiming an essence, which seems detrimental to highlighting multiple and fluid meanings of a concept. How can this be reconciled? Does it make sense to speak of a contingent core? Again, it is important to avoid dogmatism. Rather than stylizing the issue of the internal logic/structure to a debate about foundations and locking modern and post-modern positions against each other, it is more fruitful to be pragmatic and contemplate that something holds a concept together from within and lends it internal coherence, without insisting on an essence.

One way to think about the parameters of the core is to ask about the internal logic/structure that gives a concept its "basic" quality. For Koselleck, a concept is basic if it plays a central role in our socio-political language, in this case our language of international relations/world politics. That is, we consider it a concept "we cannot do without". In his words, "basic concepts combine manifold experiences and expectations in such a way that they become indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time" (Koselleck 1996: 64).[3] This points to two interrelated features, which can be seen as forming the core of a concept. First, basic concepts grasp, or refer to, fundamental features of our **socio-political** system. They are leading terms [*Leitbegriffe*] of our vocabulary trying to grasp (links between) fundamental structures, processes and events; they are keywords [*Schlüsselwörter*] and slogans [*Schlagwörter*] used by major social, economic and political organizations and movements, and scholarly attempts to describe them; and they are core terms found in major theories and ideologies (Koselleck 2011 [1972]: 8). As such, basic concepts do not merely exist as specialized terms within academic circles but permeate public discourse. One could call them "fundamental codes of a culture" (Foucault, 1970 [1966]). Second, basic concepts have a **temporal** structure containing a stock of experiences and an aspirational outlook. Koselleck argues that the ability of a basic concept to grasp key features of social relations is tied to the "experiential content" (*Erfahrungehalt*) it has accumulated and to the "innovative expectations" it raises. This feature of concepts as both backward- and forward-looking conveys not only that concepts have a temporal dimension, but also that they may allude to movement and contain a promise of progress, thus

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[3] See also Connolly's "terms of political discourse" and his discussion of whether it makes sense to distinguish "normative" from "descriptive" concepts (Connolly 1993, Ch. 1).
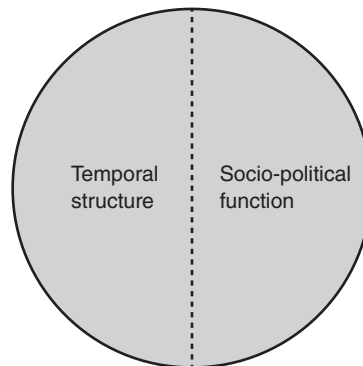
Figure 1.1   Concept core

pointing to their normative content. One might say that the quality of "basicness" is, above all, attributed by those who use a concept. However, this does not imply that within a particular community there is consensus on the concept's meaning – if anything, the opposite is the case. As Koselleck notes, basic concepts tend to be contested precisely because they are basic and open to interpretation, which prompts different actors to try and claim a monopoly on its meaning (Koselleck 1996: 65).

The attempt to delineate the core already shows that it makes little sense to see a concept as a stand-alone entity, as a free-floating unit of knowledge. Concepts come to life and gain meaning only within particular contexts. But there are different ways to think about "context" – the frame, environment or field within which a concept is embedded – and to study how a concept is situated within a particular context. So it is important to think carefully about which contexts we look at, and about the relationship between concept and context or, rather, different contextual layers.

Scholars of concepts (and political thought more generally) usually start by emphasizing the importance of language and, hence, the linguistic context. Influenced by structural linguistics going back to Saussure, they maintain that concepts gain their meaning from being situated in a "semantic field", loosely understood as a group of terms and symbols that relate to each other in a particular way. This involves looking at how a concept is linked to other concepts and, thus, embedded in a web of concepts that supports its meaning. Without delving into semantics, three kinds of relations are prevalent: with **supporting** concepts which are integral to the meaning of our concept (*sovereignty* for *the state*); with **cognate** concepts with similar meanings, or whose meanings correspond with each other and bear what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance (football and basketball are both *games*, to use his famous example); and with **contrasting** concepts that are opposite in meaning, sometimes even taking the form of counter-concepts (as in reactionary-revolutionary), which relate to and (in)form each other through a dialectic.

These relations forming a conceptual web do not need to be grounded in logic but can be habitual, sentimental or normative, and thus seemingly arbitrary in character. Their links become particularly interesting when they are said to present a causal relationship, as in the case of "democracy" and "peace" cherished among liberal IR theorists (Doyle 1983; Chan 1997; see also Ish-Shalom in Chapter 13, this volume). Analysts also need to be aware of how supporting concepts are embedded in semantic
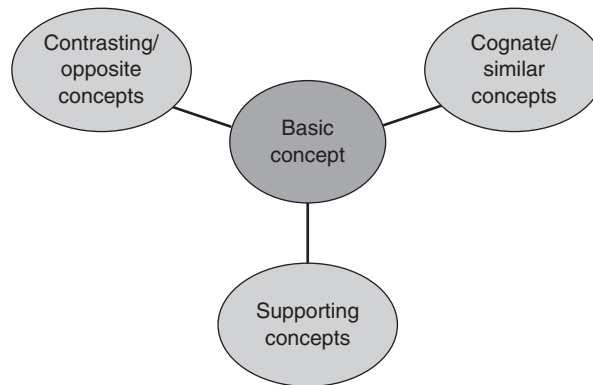
Figure 1.2   Concept web

fields of their own, the configuration of which affect the concept at hand. Finally, we need to pay attention to what happens to a concept, usually a noun, when an adjective is added to it. For instance, the concept of "liberty" takes on a particular meaning when "civil" or "economic" are added (Koselleck's example), or "positive" and "negative" (Berlin's famous distinction). The use of such qualifiers is quite common in International Relations, especially for long-standing basic concepts such as security (national, collective, human, cyber, etc.), power (hard, soft, civilian, structural, etc.) and war (civil, total, old, new, etc.), and it is important to ask how these qualifiers change the meaning of a concept and whether/at what point they create a new concept.

While analysing context in terms of semantic fields is important, it also risks reducing concepts to words and blending out their socio-political appropriation and function. After all, we want to know not only how concepts gain meaning within a linguistic structure but also how they are used and understood, that is, who speaks these words, to whom, how they are received by the audience and with what effect. We also need to take into account that the meaning of our concept is shaped through its association with extra-linguistic forces like ideas, images and practices, which often are captured in the broader notion of a "discursive field". Whatever we call it, I suggest it is useful to distinguish between four contextual layers: temporal, theoretical, material and socio-political.

Paying attention to the **temporal context** involves studying the historicity of a concept and how its meaning content is formed and evolves over time. It views concepts as embedded within a particular historical moment and/or particular structures stretching over time into the future. Conversely, analysts may ask how a concept shapes our understanding of time, namely how it directs our temporal orientation and privileges certain readings of past and future. The **theoretical context** directs attention to how the concepts and its web are situated in a broader ideational framework, or narrative, whether that is a political ideology or a theory (which, for critical scholars, is often the same). It requires exploring the role a concept plays in a particular theoretical ontology and argumentative logic and how it acquires meaning through this role, including how this meaning changes when the concept is placed in a different theory. Reversely, it asks us to understand what the concept does for/to a theory,

including how and why theorists build their theories around, or through, particular concepts. One might also extend this to investigate the place of concepts in methodological frameworks of investigation more generally, including quantitative and qualitative methods. The **material context** asks us to look at the material space(s) and bodies in which the concept is used and manifests itself, including what happens to meaning when the concept travels from one material context to another. Equally, it asks us to be sensitive about how concepts organize and shape (our awareness of) material spaces and bodies. This angle most directly raises the question of how we should conceive the relation between meaning (thought/language) and material matter. Finally, the **socio-political context** points to the practice and performance of a concept in (international) society and within a political system. It asks us to trace how a concept is used and its meaning manifested by political actors, its diffusion throughout society/the system and the different understandings and usages seen in different parts of that society/system. It also directs attention to how a concept shapes society and how its meaning becomes a subject of political contestation.

These four contexts hang together and none can be ignored. Most obviously, the temporal and the socio-political reach directly into the internal structure of a basic concept. Yet those two only come to life within the ideational structures and material conditions that make the "stuff" of history and politics. And the socio-political dimension perhaps most clearly permeates the other three and is the reason why concept analysis is interesting for students of (world) politics in the first place. To use a metaphor, these four contexts can be seen as layers of a cake and any piece we cut out, that is, any particular meaning we give the concept, is informed by all four layers. Moreover, we should conceive of contexts not as static/stable environments, but as dynamic practices, processes and flows. At the same time, contexts do not expand indefinitely but end somewhere, and where and how we conceive of their boundaries is an important question. Finally, accounting for concepts in context not only involves asking about how the former is placed in the latter and how this imbues the concept with meaning. It should also have an eye on how the concept performs in a particular context and affects our understanding of it. Indeed, one might say that a basic concept functions like a keystone holding the context together, yet also is supported by it. However we conceive of the relationship, the bottom line is that we need to pay attention to how concept and context are interwoven and shape each other.
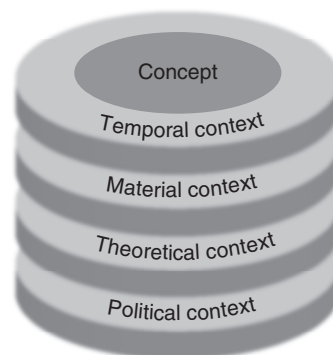

Figure 1.3   Context cake

Three Approaches to Concept Analysis

Unpacking a concept, its meanings, functions and performances by taking into account all the above is challenging and there is no simple recipe. Moreover, as the contributions to this volume testify, there is more than one way to unpack a concept. One reason for the multitude of possible approaches is that we choose and design our approach according to our motivation for doing concept analysis. In other words, our approach is significantly influenced by what we consider its purpose to be, what we want to achieve with it. Thus, the question of *what is* concept analysis is tied to *how to* and *why should we* do concept analysis. This is related to the question *whose* concept we study: is it "our" analytical category or is it a socio-political resource used by those we study? The answer is usually "both", and every approach must grapple with the interplay between these two levels and the tension it generates in its own way. As a consequence, tracing concepts within or through the above contexts always oscillates between deconstruction (or disaggregation) and reconstruction (or concept formation). The following pages show that this can occur in rather different ways. Here, it suffices to say that disaggregation is not simply about showing shattered pieces but about outlining the concepts' different associations in the above contexts. Equally important, reconstructive moves tend to advance a particular reading of the concept and, in doing so, establish a hierarchy between "better" and "worse" readings, which need to be justified. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will outline three approaches to concept analysis, which are labelled historical, scientific and political(critical). Each approach is discussed with reference to a particular scholar, namely Koselleck, Sartori and Foucault, respectively, serving as a representative and source of inspiration.

The historical approach

The historical approach foregrounds the temporal context and focuses on a concept's place in and its evolution throughout "history". The starting point is the recognition that using contemporary basic concepts to grasp historical events and periods is problematic because it shapes our understanding of the past and makes us see/write one kind of history rather than another. Can we use basic concepts that did not exist in the past to reconstruct that past? And even if a concept did exist back in the period we are examining, how do we know it did not mean something completely different then? Grappling with this basic problem of representation, the historical approach takes up the notion that concepts have a history and seeks to improve our awareness of their historical depth. However, the motivation is not simply historical curiosity to explore how concepts were used in the past, but also to provide a better understanding of how they evolved and how we arrived at the meanings we employ today. Thus, the aim is to make us aware of both continuity and contingency of meanings under, and in interaction with, specific historical conditions.

Historians of ideas, philosophers of history, and political and literary theorists, have presented rich studies in this regard that can be subsumed under the label of "history of concepts" or "concept history". Perhaps the most ambitious project emerged in postwar Germany under the stewardship of Reinhart Koselleck, which culminated in the eight volumes of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Koselleck et al.

2004 [1972]).[4] Koselleck's approach of concept history [*Begriffsgeschichte*] is complex and evolved over many years (Richter 1987; Lehmann and Richter 1996; Steinmetz 2008), yet its intellectual baseline is an attempt at combining linguistic analysis and historical analysis to explore how a concept is understood and employed differently throughout history. This goes far beyond etymology – the tracing of a word's evolution from its alleged "roots" or "origins" to current usage – by investigating the evolution of language and thought in the context of historical experience. Assuming that concepts are "in motion", the approach is especially interested in tracing changes in a concept's meaning. Crudely put, one could say that the historical approach lends itself to explore four instances in the life of a concept: (1) concept **invention** (emergence): how a new concept establishes itself in a particular historical context; (2) concept **fixation** (reification): how a particular meaning becomes hegemonic and gains "common sense" status; (3) concept **transformation** (modification): how a term takes on a new meaning or meanings; and, finally, (4) concept **disappearance**: how a concept ceases to be used and drops from our vocabulary. Although a complete approach takes into account all four phenomena, concept history in Koselleck's tradition is primarily interested in tracking change and so fixation/reification is discussed here as a distinct concern of the third approach outlined below.

Tracing the life of a concept is not mere description. It also involves explanation of why concepts emerge, are modified or disappear. Koselleck's approach offers a largely structural account of change. It is especially interested in how conceptual change correlates with the discontinuity of political, social and economic structures, and in exploring how and why certain experiences and structural changes are grasped as, for instance, "revolutions". It explores convergences and divergences between "real" history and how that "history" has been understood by contemporaries, and sees divergences as tensions which prompt the emergence of new concepts or a change in meaning of existing ones.[5] In doing so, the historical approach tells us something not only about the life of a concept but also about the configuration of the societies and historical periods in which concepts emerge or are transformed. It not only illuminates conceptual change but also provides a window into understanding societal transformations and, hence, historical change. This dual character is expressed in Koselleck's note that concepts are not only *indicators of* but also *factors in* change (Koselleck 2004 [1972]: 86). The latter suggests that concepts do something. It asks analysts to trace their representational performance by asking how concepts guide the thinking and behaviour of actors and shape the organization of (international) society and, consequently, how they influence the course of history.

Analysing how concepts, concept webs and socio-political structures implicate each other and, thus, understanding a concept's historical evolution *and* its social organization and use, are ambitious and come with challenges. One such challenge

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[4] The full title (translated) is *Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany*.

[5] Thus, despite emphasizing the primacy of language, Koselleck's approach does not take the radical position that there is nothing outside language. If that was so, it could not investigate the relationship between concepts and socio-political structures, including material context, in a way that lends the latter some sort of causal force.

is the question of agency. Concepts do not act (on their own) – looking at a "concept in action" requires looking at who is using it. So to understand their historical evolution, we must also ask what historical actors do with concepts, why and how they assign and manipulate meaning and, thus, influence the shape and life of a concept. Yet, tracing the use of concepts among a variety of agents in a given society is not an easy task and requires a fine-grained analysis difficult to reconcile with a macro-historical perspective (Steinmetz 2008). This points to perhaps the greatest challenge, namely the methodological demand to both trace patterns of political language surrounding a particular concept in a specific place and time (synchronic analysis) *and* follow the concept throughout history, that is, across space and time (diachronic analysis). Whereas for Koselleck the two modes of analysis are inseparable, historians of political thought such as J. G. A. Pocock (1996) are sceptical about the possibility of both tracing the evolution of a concept through time and adequately accounting for socio-political context. They argue, instead, that the latter should take priority. This preference for a synchronic perspective stems from the commitment to a mode of historical analysis also known as the "Cambridge School",[6] which holds that a concept's meaning is bound to particular discursive and, especially, ideational structures governing a society at a particular point in time. And these structures, including the concept web any given concept is embedded in, are seen as multi-layered living organisms of which those using a concept may not be consciously aware (Pocock 1989: 33).

The Cambridge School thus reminds us of the need to think carefully about how we conceive of and capture historical context and what we consider adequate sources for reconstructing a concept's meaning. However, we must also be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater by dissolving a concept in a socio-political language system. In the end, there is no fixed formula for how to balance and combine diachronic and synchronic analysis and for sorting through the relationship between concept and context(s). The chosen mode of analysis is not least informed by the kind of change one wants to look at: whether one seeks to trace "concepts in motion" from a macro-historical perspective, which analyses the evolution of a concept across multiple generations, or to reconstruct "concepts in action" in a micro-diachronic analysis, which delves into the complexity of how a concept performs and changes in a temporally and spatially confined setting. Both are perfectly valid versions of the historical approach.

The scientific approach

What is termed here the scientific approach sees concepts as methodological tools to grasp the contemporary world, to measure, explain and predict political dynamics across different geographical and cultural locations. Its main objective is tied to the modern ambition of demystifying the world and to developing better, in the sense of both more accurate and more useful, concepts for capturing that world. It is guided by the conviction that only "clear concepts" bring our knowledge "into close and self-correcting relations" with empirical reality (Blumer 1954: 5). Working towards this

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[6] The other major representative of which, besides Pocock, is Quentin Skinner (1969).

aim, the scientist seeks to sharpen the conceptual toolkit by revising and refining or, if necessary, inventing and replacing basic concepts to build better theories and improve our measuring techniques. At first sight, this ambition to engage in what Herbert Blumer (1954: 6) calls "precision endeavors" to improve and refine concepts, runs counter to the objective to open them up and reveal their multifaceted nature. And yet, by directing attention to how concepts are used in comparative research, it highlights attempts at mastering the link between concepts and context and at dealing with the tension between universal and particular, which leads to a distinct approach to concept analysis.

One prominent representative of this approach is Giovanni Sartori, an Italian scholar trained in political philosophy who became a central figure in the emergence of the (sub)discipline of Comparative Politics in the United States. Aware that language mediates and guides knowledge production, Sartori's starting point is that concepts play a central role in data collection. That is, they function not only as elements of a theoretical system but also as "data containers" (Sartori 1970). This leads to a conundrum already encountered in the historical approach: because scientific research needs universal categories/concepts that can **travel** across space and enable analysts to compare, it must assume that concepts have core characteristics out of which indicators can be formed for collecting data in different places. At the same time, the meaning content of a concept is built up in the process of measuring "the world", which is to say that concepts only gain substance through empirical research in particular places. And so they are expected to function as "empirical universals" (Sartori). In navigating this tension between the universal and the particular, the temptation may be to put more weight on the former. However, Sartori (1970) warns, employing a concept across geographical and cultural spaces without understanding a concept's history and the discursive field it is made to work in will result in "conceptual confusion", namely a situation where the seemingly same concept ends up describing very different things.

To tackle such confusion, the scientific approach asks researchers to pay attention to the flexibility of a concept and its modification in the research process. Specifically, it looks at (i) the concept's "extension" – the process in which a concept widens and shifts its boundaries to include more and/or different elements, thus becoming broader and more complex in meaning, and (ii) the concept's "intension" – the process which zooms "inwards" and highlights its core elements, thus specifying its meaning. Scholars offering strategies to navigate this dynamic often do so in an overly technical discussion about logic, semantics and methods (Sartori 1984; Goertz 2006; Collier and Gerring 2009). Here it suffices to say that the approach requires the analyst to reflect on how a concept is **adjusted**, **translated** and, to a certain extent, **transformed** when it moves, or is moved, from one space to another. Importantly, this involves exploring what happens to a concept in the process of **application**, or **operationalization**, namely when research moves from theoretical reasoning to empirical investigation. That is, the approach seeks to understand how a concept is altered when it moves from the abstract level, where it carries a general meaning, to the concrete empirical level, where it functions as a "data container". To use a well-known metaphor from Sartori, it traces how a concept is modified when it (or, rather, the researcher) climbs down "the ladder of abstraction" (Sartori 1970: 1040-41). This also shifts attention

to how the concept interacts with the chosen method, whether that is quantitative or qualitative in character.

However, the scientific approach is not content with tracing these travels and recording changes. After all, for the scientist the task is not simply "to understand our conceptual confusions" but "to clear them up" (Gaus 2000: 16). Driven by the aim to create ever more accurate concepts, the approach seeks to minimize "distortions" in the process of translation and operationalization by devising rules that keep flexibility in check and allow concepts to travel across contexts without disappearing. Ultimately, Sartori's solution is unsurprising: he calls for "minimal definitions" that define the concept's "basic structure" independent of context (Sartori 1984). In other words, he seeks to stabilize meaning by specifying the core attributes of a concept and anchoring them on a universal plane.

There are two problems with this strategy. First, seeing vagueness and ambiguity as "defects" (Sartori 1984) and a "basic deficiency" (Blumer 1954: 5) sits uneasily with Koselleck's insight, discussed earlier, that concepts are inherently and necessarily vague. Indeed, it ignores the idea that vagueness or ambiguity is often what makes a concept useful and gives it a long shelf-life, whether in scholarly debate or in political practice. Second, it ignores intractable disputes about the meaning of basic concepts, which W. B. Gallie (1956) famously captured in the notion that many concepts remain "essentially contested". As Gallie notes, often "endless disputes" about the proper use of concepts such as "democracy" or "justice" are "perfectly genuine: although not resolvable by argument of any kind, [they] are nevertheless sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence" (Gallie 1956: 169). For the scientist, this state of affairs is puzzling and frustrating, especially as the dispute requires agreement between the two sides that, at some level, they are talking about the *same* concept. Gallie argues that this is the case when both derive their reading from the same "exemplar" (1956: 176), which functions as the source from which their respective reading of the concept flows. Because the "exemplar" – like all basic concepts – is internally complex and open/ambiguous, parties are able to focus on different elements and configurations and develop different adaptations. As such, both parties can claim "ownership" of the exemplar, yet neither is able to persuade the other that its claim is ill-founded or invalid.

Despite these limitations to the scientific ambition, not all is lost for the agenda to clear up confusion, as it invites an investigation into different readings of an "exemplar" and the establishing of a sensible **typology** of these readings without favouring one over another. The crucial question is whether (a) the different types are deemed compatible and can be integrated into a single research process, that is whether they can be combined, or are claimed to be combinable, into one master concept (one might call this the "Sartori position"), or whether (b) the types are deemed essentially contested and, thus, incompatible and cannot be combined and integrated into a single, coherent research process (the "Gallie position"). The answer has significant implications for how we use typologies in scholarly communication and collaboration. It either holds that a concept can serve as a bridge for scholars working in different theoretical frameworks, enabling fruitful exchange between and integration of paradigms, or it allows scholars to more clearly see and appreciate different readings, guarding against the belief that they are talking about the same thing when, in fact, they are talking past each other.

The political/critical approach

The political/critical approach starts from the famous dictum that knowledge is power. It accepts that concepts are central parts of knowledge production in modernity and that their purpose is to frame, categorize and organize reality, thereby bringing order and cognitive stability to our understanding of the world. Other than the scientist, however, it treats this stabilizing function with suspicion. Influenced by a post-modern stance, it considers the order created by concepts artificial, blocking out the complexity of the world and upholding certain power structures that benefit some and disadvantage others. The approach, discussed here through the work of Michel Foucault, has a dual aim: first, to explore how concepts form and their meaning becomes reified through their use across society, and to highlight that the formation and performances of concepts are implicated in structures of power. In doing so, it overlaps with concept history and it makes the scientific approach part of its object of analysis.[7] Second, the political/critical approach seeks to disrupt and challenge these reified meanings and underlying power structures to open the door for alternative conceptions and, ultimately, societal change. As such, of the three approaches outlined here, it is the one that most explicitly takes a critical stance and understands concept analysis as an engagement with politics, indeed it is political in motivation.

To understand **reification** processes, the political/critical approach investigates how particular kinds of knowledge are produced, that is, how concepts are used and **perform** in society and to what effect. It highlights that, by giving meaning to "things", concepts don't just make these things intelligible, they actually *make* things, that is, in the words of Foucault, they "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1974: 49). As such, this approach focuses on the productive power of basic concepts in not merely guiding but constituting thought, action and identities or subjectivities, on both elite and subaltern levels, as well as altering material realities. One important aspect of this analysis is to explore how basic concepts and the *epistemes*, that is, the concept webs and broader discourses surrounding them, become institutionalized. Investigating the process of **institutionalization** involves tracing how the ideational content of the concept is formed and becomes entwined with material reality. In other words, it studies a concept's material manifestation, including the aesthetic expression of a concept in architectural designs or "hard" forms of infrastructure. Yet it also can take more intangible forms if "institution" is understood to not only encompass formal structures with a concrete physical presence, but also informal practices which are not centrally controlled, or monitored, and may not be localizable in one place, or space, but are diffused throughout society in a seemingly uncoordinated manner. Thus, the analysis of how concepts exercise power largely depends on how we think productive power works and, by extension, how it can be observed. Are concepts embedded in a dominant ideology imposed from the top, as in Gramscian hegemony, or do they emerge out of and are reproduced through everyday practices, as in Foucauldian governmentality? The answer may well be "a bit of both", but this cannot distract from the conundrum that any attempt to analyse the political performance of a particular concept – the production and effect of its meaning on society – relies on an understanding of another basic concept, namely power.

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[7] Tellingly, Foucault (2003) at one point called his work "antiscientific" in orientation.

As noted, the political approach does not stop with exploring the reification and reproduction of basic concepts by unmasking power configurations. It also seeks to weaken these configurations and act as a critical voice against the temptation to find a singular meaning and accept a "common sense". It does so by highlighting techniques of resistance, subversion and **contestation** of meaning and, thus, showing that meaning is (or should be) a matter of politics. Indeed, as the name suggests, the political approach actively participates in and seeks to advance contestation and regards concept analysis as a mode of resistance. One approach exemplifying this is Foucault's **genealogy**, a method that overlaps with concept history in exploring the evolution of a concept within socio-political structures. Due to its focus on reification, genealogy differs from concept history in that it does not seek to trace change, whether in a macro- or micro-historical perspective, but how a concept is **assembled** into something taken for granted while, simultaneously, showing that any notion of unified or coherent meaning is an illusion.

The latter aspect most clearly sets this approach apart from those discussed so far. It brings to the fore the historical contingency of stabilized knowledge through the dual move of critiquing (deconstructing) the notion of a coherent historical narrative about a concept and bringing to the foreground (reconstructing) its disparity, the marginalized and forgotten aspects. Foucault adopts this approach from Nietzsche, specifically from Nietzsche's critique of the notion of "origin", which exemplifies the idea that there is an essence or singular truth that can be excavated. Instead, Foucault holds, if the genealogist "listens to history he finds … the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin … it is disparity" (Foucault 1977, part 1). And so rather than trying to identify an origin (or "exemplar") and to trace an unbroken continuity in the historical life of a concept, the genealogical approach asks the analyst to "identify the accidents, the minute deviations … the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations" that underpin the life of a concept (Foucault 1977, part 3). The study of discontinuity and **contingency** aims at revealing aspects of a concept's life which have been glossed over by conventional accounts and thus become invisible, to show that the concept has no unifying shape but only fragments of meaning. In other words, it seeks to carve out what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 2003: 7), namely meanings/uses that are ignored because they do not fit established discourses, which are considered irrelevant or invalid and, hence, are marginalized, squeezed out of sight.

Where and how one finds a concept's disparate, **subjugated fragments** depends, once again, on our reading of the power structure. Often, the search for these forgotten or silenced meanings takes place "on the local level", although, as Foucault reminds us, it is important not to mistake subjugated for "common-sense" knowledge, as the latter tends to be an expression of the dominant, taken-for-granted account and is exactly what genealogy works against. Also, finding this meaning does not necessarily require focusing on subalterns (a tricky concept in itself), but may also be found in the contradictions and tensions of dominant discourses, or in elite voices that have become forgotten. In any case, the genealogical approach requires attention to detail. As Foucault famously put it, "genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that

have been scratched over and recopied many times". Moreover, the researcher must explore how meaning is tied to "the most uncompromising places, in what we feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (Foucault 1977: 1). This not only poses significant methodological challenges but also opens up a very different understanding of what concept analysis entails: it not only asks analysts to explore the grey zones and lived experiences outside established frameworks, but may also require a different style of analysis that replaces conventional logics and rigid systematicism in favour of a playful, improvised and disruptive mode of research and writing.

Conclusion

The three approaches outlined here are ideal types, and while they can be seen as distinct they are not mutually exclusive. It is possible, for instance, to read the historical approach as a baseline for the other two, with the scientific approach and the political approach taking up certain aspects of the historical approach and developing them in different directions. Moreover, none of the three approaches offers a polished roadmap. Rather, they are dynamic intellectual projects which have created distinct spaces for conversation containing different, at times diverging, views about how to engage concepts. So, while the differences between these three approaches should be taken seriously, in practice one may well end up with a combination. Thus, it is not surprising that the chapters in this book do not fit neatly into one or the other approach but can be seen as highlighting and combining certain themes and angles, as well as adding others. As such, even if those three approaches delineate the playing field of concept analysis, one might well come to the conclusion that the book does not present three but 17 approaches.

On that note, a word should be said about how the concepts covered in this book were selected and clustered. All of them are basic concepts in the field of IR; certainly each author seems convinced that their respective concept fits this category. Variation in emphasis makes it possible to devise four categories along which concepts were classified for the purpose of this book: (1) fundamental human *claims* (traits or goals) attributed to political actors (power, security, rationality, identity); (2) pertinent *conditions* of human existence characterizing international relations (war, peace, anarchy, society, capitalism); (3) prominent *systems of governance* underpinning world politics (sovereignty, hegemony, democracy, religion); and (4) central *modes of transformation* marking the current period (revolution, intervention, integration, globalization).

Of course, this classification is far from perfect. Apart from the fact that many of the concepts have a place in each other's conceptual web, the four categories overlap. Thus, as will be clear to the reader, the concepts discussed in this book fit in more than one category. One could reasonably ask, for instance, why security and peace are in different sections, why capitalism is not categorized as a system of governance, or why hegemony or globalization are not listed under conditions. Going a step further, one could also come up with alternative clusters. Taking the sociology of the discipline as an organizing framework, one could label power, security, war, sovereignty, anarchy and rationality "dominant" concepts, with society, hegemony and democracy as "secondary" concepts. A third cluster containing identity, capitalism,

religion and revolution, which had been pushed to the margins of the IR discourse, might be termed "forgotten" concepts; and a fourth group consisting of integration and globalization could be called "novel" concepts. And, of course, one could have chosen an entirely different set of concepts! Given the complexity and ever-growing diversity of angles on "world politics", the options are endless and the selection here is, to some extent, arbitrary. But then, as Koselleck concedes, this is still the case with the 122 concepts covered in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Koselleck 2011 [1972]: 8, 32). So, as long as the reader feels provoked to think about criteria for choosing and classifying concepts, the attempt will have been worthwhile. In the end, my hope is that the following pages will stimulate readers to think (more) carefully and critically about *their* favourite concepts, what we do with them and what they do with us.

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