

A Critical Review of “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics” by Giovanni Sartori

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The Plea: Back to Basics

The study of comparative politics, and political science more generally, is in trouble. So thought Giovanni Sartori in 1970, and so he still proclaims today (now almost 90 years old, he’s still ready to deplore how things have not improved since then, as he did when he delivered the 2009 Karl Deutsch lecture at the IPSA conference: http://videlectures.net/ipsa09_sartori_kdlecture/). The study of politics has been hijacked by both the unconscious – often qualitative – thinker, guilty of “crude logical mishandling,” and the overconscious thinker – often quantitative – guilty of “logical perfectionism (and paralysis)” (pg. 1033). Sartori’s plea is to “steer a middle course” between these two extremes via the use of “elementary logic” – for it is this training that really defines methodology: “a concern with the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry” and a form of *logos*, or “thinking about thinking” (pg. 1033). And the place to start is at the conceptualization stage.

Qualitative Conceptualization As a Pre-Condition for All Empirical Research

Conceptualization is an inherently qualitative enterprise – quantitative methods cannot supply the requisite answers, and they similarly cannot be effectively employed without this pre-conditional qualitative exercise. To suggest that everything is a matter of degree is a lazy cop-out, for “differences in degree obtain only after having established that two or more objects have the same attributes or properties, i.e. belong to the same species” (pg. 1044). In other words, before we can speak of measuring a variable, we need to ask ourselves, ‘what are we measuring?’ This inherently requires one to define a concept by first deciding what should be included and what should not. We cannot speak of measuring democracy or degrees of democracy until we have defined what democracy is and what it isn’t. The quantification of political science has instead exacerbated “conceptual stretching,” namely by “switching from “what is” questions to “how much” questions” – by posing the latter question without first asking the former, “we have started to run before having learned how to walk” (pgs. 1036; 1039). Conceptualization requires that the logic of classification precedes the logic of gradation. The former ensures that we have a clearly specified concept, the latter seeks to operationalize the concept into something measurable – a variable (though not all concepts can be turned into variables (pg. 1037)).

Beware Empirical Vaporization

Qualitative conceptualization has, however, become a wishy-washy world of “vague, amorphous conceptualizations” (pg. 1034). The political scientist driven to generalize understands that if his concepts are to travel, he must render his definition more all-encompassing – and the laziest way to do so is to render concepts more vague. The drive against taxonomical thinking and in favor of “everything is a matter of degree” thinking has led to fishing expeditions for data “without adequate nets” (pg. 1039). In the end, “nothing is gained if our universals turn out to be “no difference” categories leading to pseudo-equivalences” (pg. 1035). In the extreme, we have a case of “empirical vaporization,” where the political scientist is unable to say what phenomena should be excluded from the concept, and hence we have a complete “nullification of the problem” (pg. 1043). This is the problem that Sartori attributes, as an illustrative example, to structural functionalist approaches in comparative politics (which were predominant at the time of his writing). The structural functionalist, who speaks of “structures” and “functions,” cannot even define what each concept means. For “even when we deliberately ask “what is,” we are invariably prompted to reply in terms of “what

for.” What is an election? A means (a structure) for electing office holders. What is a legislature? An arrangement for producing legislation” (pg. 1047). This leads to severe problems. For example, structural functionalists argue that all structures – legislatures, bureaucracies, crime organizations, etc. – are multifunctional. But by being unable to clearly define what a structure is (for structural functionalists can only respond with what the structure is for), we cannot empirically evaluate if this is the case. Could we not have a case of two structures with single functions? Or three unifunctional structures? And “if we can always find structural alternatives for whatever function, what is the use of structural-functionalist analysis?” (pg. 1048).

How to Proceed: Conceptualization and the Ladder of Abstraction

For Sartori, concepts are “data containers,” and as such when employing taxonomical thinking – defining what a concept is and what it is not – we must be driven by empirical realities – or by “objects” (pg. 1039). Conceptualization and measurement proceeds in two steps: first, we must define classes. “Classes are required to be mutually exclusive, i.e. class concepts represent characteristics which the object under consideration must either have or lack. Two items being compared must belong first to the same class, and either have or not have an attribute.” Second, we can employ the logic of gradation: “the two items can be matched in terms of which has it [the characteristic that renders them part of the same class] more or less. Hence the logic of gradation belongs to the logic of classification” (pg. 1038). But we are not done, for concepts have a two-part structure: “1) observational terms, and 2) the vertical disposition of such terms along a ladder of abstraction” (pg. 1040). What does it mean to vertically arrange objects along a ladder of abstraction? “We make a concept more abstract and more general by lessening its properties or attributes. Conversely, a concept is specified by the addition (or unfolding of qualifications), i.e. by augmenting its attributes or properties” (pg. 1041). In other words, we do not render concepts more universal – and broader the scope of our empirical inquiry – by rendering concepts more vague; rather, we do so by lessening the number of clearly defined properties that empirical objects must have to belong to the conceptual class we are specifying. It is for this reason that arguments suggesting that broader concepts and theories are better because they produce more opportunities for evaluation and falsification are incorrect, for while we are increasing the number of objects that can belong to that conceptual class (thus the scope of our empirical inquiry), we are also decreasing the number of attributes required for an object to belong to that class (pg. 1044).

But what exactly is the ladder of abstraction? At the top of the ladder of abstraction are high level categories – “universal conceptualizations” allowing for “cross-area comparisons among heterogeneous contexts (global theory)”; in the middle, there are medium level categories, allowing for “intra-area comparisons among relatively homogeneous contexts (middle range theory)”; finally, at the bottom of the ladder are low level categories, permitting “country by country analysis (narrow-gauge theory).” Sartori rejects the belief that the top of the ladder of abstraction is necessarily the place to be; in fact, the low level of abstraction may be the place to start: “First, when the comparative scholar is engaged in field work, the more his fact-finding categories are brought down to this level, the better his research. Second, it is the evidence obtained nation-by-nation, or region-by-region (or whatever the unit of analysis may be) that helps us decide which classification works, or which new criterion should be developed [...] whether a classification may serve multiple purposes, and which classification fits this requirement best, this is something we discover inductively, that is, starting from the bottom of the ladder of abstraction” (pg. 1043).

Some Thoughts on Sartori’s Arguments

My apologies if I offer only brief thoughts here – I have always found this article to be fascinating and to hit the mark on multiple levels. My main quibble with it is that Sartori does not clearly define what endows an attribute of a conceptual class with precision. Given that Sartori clearly believes that all

conceptual classes, regardless of level of generality, must contain at least one clearly specified attribute, it would be helpful if he discussed what the qualities render classes precise. This is particularly difficult for concepts like “democracy,” for which there are multiple competing definitions – most of which have rather porous and hazy contours. Must we proceed arbitrarily to some degree – selecting one definition of democracy and coming up with a cut-off point that may not necessarily have any particular theoretical significance? Carles Boix’s book, *Democracy and Redistribution*, for example, defines democracy as a system where at least half of the adult male population is allowed to vote. Empirically, this is a precise class – but is it precise conceptually? Is this conceptualization, in other words, truly capturing the meaning of democracy? The political scientist who cares about conceptualization may encounter just as much paralysis when faced with these sorts of seemingly arbitrary conceptual distinctions as he/she does when employing the quantitatively-minded technical perfectionism that Sartori cautions us to avoid.