USES AND ABUSES OF POLITICAL CONCEPTS

Andrew Heywood

Introduction

Concepts have a particular importance for students of politics. It is no exaggeration to suggest that political argument often boils down to a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms. Enemies may argue, fight and even go to war, each claiming to be 'defending freedom', 'upholding democracy' or 'supporting justice'. The problem is that words such as 'freedom', 'democracy' and 'justice' have different meanings to different people, so that the concepts themselves come to seem problematic.

At least three reasons can be suggested to explain the unusual importance of concepts in political analysis. The first is that political analysis typically deals in generalisations. The significance of this can be highlighted by considering the differences between politics and history in this respect. Whereas a historian is likely to want to make sense of a particular event, say, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution or the Eastern European Revolutions of 1989-91, a political analyst is more likely to study such events with a view to making sense of a larger or more general phenomenon, in this case the phenomenon of revolution. For historians, a special study of the concept of 'revolution' is of marginal value, because what they are primarily interested in is what is different, even unique, about a particular set of events. For political analysts, on the other hand, a study of the concept of 'revolution' is not only necessary - it is the very process through which political enquiry proceeds.

The second reason is that the language used by students of politics is largely the same as that used by practitioners of politics, and particularly by professional politicians. As the latter are primarily interested in political advocacy rather than political understanding, they have a strong incentive to use language to manipulate and sometimes confuse. This, in turn, forces students of politics to be especially careful in their use of language. They must define terms clearly and refine concepts with precision in order to safeguard them from the misrepresentations often current in everyday political debate.

The final reason is that political concepts are frequently entwined with ideological beliefs. Since the emergence of modern political ideologies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, not only has a new language of political discourse emerged, but the terms and concepts of political debate have also been imbued with complex and often conflicting meanings. Political concepts are therefore particularly challenging creatures: they are often ambiguous and not infrequently the subject of rivalry and debate, and they may come 'loaded' with value judgements and ideological implications of which their users may be unaware.

What is a concept?

A concept is a general idea about something, usually expressed in a single word or a short phrase. A concept is more than a proper noun or the name of a thing. There is, for example, a difference between talking about a cat (a particular and unique cat) and having a concept of a 'cat' (the idea of a cat). The concept of a cat is not a 'thing' but an 'idea', an idea composed of the various attributes that give a cat its distinctive character: 'a furry mammal', 'small', 'domesticated', 'catches rats and mice', and so on. In the same way, the concept of 'presidency' refers not to any specific president, but rather to a set of ideas about the organisation of executive power. Concepts are therefore 'general' in the sense that they can refer to a number of objects, indeed to any object that complies with the general idea itself.

What, then, is the value of concepts? Concept formation is an essential step in the process of reasoning. Concepts are the 'tools' with which we think, criticise, argue, explain and analyse. Merely perceiving the external world does not in itself give us knowledge about it. In order to make sense of the world we must, in a sense, impose meaning upon it, and we do this through the construction of concepts. Quite simply, to treat a cat as a cat, we must first have a concept of what it is. Precisely the same applies to the process of political reasoning: we build up our knowledge of the political world not simply by looking at it, but though developing and refining concepts which will help us make sense of it. Concepts, in that sense, are the building blocks of human knowledge. Nevertheless, concepts can also be slippery customers, and this is particularly the case in relation to political concepts. Amongst the problems posed by political concepts are that they are often value-laden, that their meanings may be the subject of argument and debate, and that they are sometimes invested with greater substance and significance than they actually possess.

Normative and descriptive concepts

Normative concepts are often described as 'values'; they refer to moral principles or ideals, that which *should*, *ought* or *must* be brought about. A wide range of political concepts are value-laden in this sense – 'liberty', 'rights', 'justice', 'equality', 'tolerance' and so on. Values or normative concepts therefore advance or prescribe certain forms of conduct rather than describe events or facts. Consequently, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle political values from the moral, philosophical and ideological beliefs of those who advance them. By contrast, descriptive or positive concepts refer to 'facts' which supposedly have an objective and demonstrable existence: they refer to what *is*. Concepts such as 'power', 'authority', 'order' and 'law' are in this sense descriptive rather than normative. It is possible to ask whether they exist or do not exist.

The distinction between facts and values is often regarded as a necessary precondition for clear thinking. Whereas values may be regarded as a matter of opinion, facts can be proved to be either true or false. As a result, descriptive concepts are thought to be 'neutral' or value-free: they stand up to the rigour of scientific examination. Indeed, under the influence of positivism, the pressure to develop a science of politics meant that in the middle decades of the twentieth century normative concepts were often discarded as 'metaphysical' and therefore nonsense. However, the problem with political concepts is that facts and values are invariably interlinked, even apparently descriptive concepts being 'loaded' with a set of moral and ideological implications. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of 'authority'. If authority is defined as 'the right to influence the behaviour of others', it is certainly possible to use the concept descriptively to say who possesses authority and who does not, and to examine the basis upon which it is exercised. However, it is impossible completely to divorce the concept from value judgements about when, how and why authority *should* be exercised. In short, no one is neutral about authority. For example, whereas conservatives, who emphasise the need for order to be imposed from above, tend to regard authority as rightful and healthy, anarchists, who believe government and law to be evil, invariably see authority as nakedly oppressive. All political concepts, descriptive as well as normative, need therefore to be understood in the light of the ideological perspectives of those who use them.

One response to the value-laden character of political concepts that has been particularly influential since the late twentieth century has been the movement to insist upon 'political correctness' in the use of language. Political correctness, sometimes simply known as PC, has been advocated by feminists, civil rights activists and representatives of minority groups generally, who attempt to purge language of racist, sexist and other derogatory or disparaging implications. It is based upon the belief that language invariably reflects the power structure in society at large, and so discriminates in favour of dominant groups and against subordinate ones. Obvious examples include the use of 'Man' or 'mankind' to refer to the human race, references to ethnic minorities as 'negroes' or 'coloureds', and the description of developing world countries as 'third world' or 'underdeveloped' (although 'developing world' is also attacked for implying that the Western model of development is applicable throughout the world). The goal of political correctness is to develop bias-free terminology that enables political argument to be conducted in non-discriminatory language. The difficulty with this position, however, is that the hope of an unbiased and objective language of political discourse is illusory. At best, 'negative' terms can be replaced by 'positive' ones; for example, the 'disabled' can be referred to as the 'differently abled', and 'negroes' can be described as 'black'. Critics of political correctness argue, moreover, that it imposes an ideological straightjacket upon language that both impoverishes its descriptive power and denies expression to 'incorrect' views.

Contested concepts

A further problem is that political concepts often become the subject of intellectual and ideological controversy. It is not uncommon, as pointed out above, for political argument to take place between people who claim to uphold the same principle or the same ideal. Conceptual disagreement is therefore one of the battlegrounds of politics itself. This is reflected in attempts to establish a particular conception of a concept as objectively correct, as in the case of 'true' democracy, 'true' freedom, 'true' justice and so forth. A way out of this dilemma was suggested by W.B. Gallie (1955-6), who suggested that in the case of concepts such as 'power', 'justice' and 'freedom' controversy runs so deep that no neutral or settled definition can ever be developed. These concepts should be recognised, he argued, as 'essentially contested concepts'. In effect, each term encompasses a number of rival concepts, none of which can be accepted as its 'true' meaning. To acknowledge that a concept is 'essentially contested' is not, however, to abandon the attempt to understand it, but rather to recognise that competing versions of the concept may be equally valid.

The notion that most, if not all, concepts are many-faced or 'essentially contested' has nevertheless been subject to criticism, particularly by Terence Ball (1988). Two lines of argument have been advanced. The first notes that many theorists who attempt to apply Gallie's insights (as, for example, Lukes (1974) in relation to 'power') continue to defend their preferred interpretation of a concept against its rivals. This refusal to accept that all versions of the concept are equally valid produces on-going debate and argument which could, at some stage in the future, lead to the emergence of a single, agreed concept. In other words, no concept is 'essentially' contested in the sense that rivalry and disagreement is fundamental to its nature. The second line of argument points out that Gallie's analysis is ahistorical. Certain concepts are now contested which were once the subject of widespread agreement. It is notable, for instance, that the wide-ranging and deep disagreement that currently surrounds 'democracy' only emerged from the late eighteenth century onwards alongside new forms of ideological thinking. As a result, it is perhaps better to treat contested concepts as 'currently' contested (Birch, 1993) or as 'contingently' contested (Ball, 1997).

Words and things

A final problem with concepts is what can be called the fetishism of concepts. This occurs when concepts are treated as though they have a concrete existence separate from, and, in some senses, holding sway over, the human beings who use them. In short, words are treated as things, rather than as devices for understanding things. Max Weber (1864-1920) attempted to deal with this problem by classifying particular concepts as 'ideal types'. An ideal type is a mental construct in which an attempt is made to draw out meaning from an otherwise almost infinitely complex reality through the presentation of a logical extreme. Ideal types are thus explanatory tools, not approximations of reality; they neither 'exhaust reality' nor offer an ethical ideal. Concepts such as ' democracy', 'human rights' and capitalism' are thus more rounded and coherent than the unshapely realities they seek to describe. Weber himself treated 'authority' and 'bureaucracy' as ideal types. The importance of recognising particular concepts as ideal types is that it underlines the fact that concepts are only analytical tools. For this reason, it is better to think of concepts or ideal types not as being 'true' or 'false', but merely as more or less 'useful'.

Further attempts to emphasise the contingent nature of political concepts have been undertaken by so-called postmodern theorists. They have attacked the 'traditional' search for universal values acceptable to everyone on the grounds that this assumes that there is a moral and rational high point from which all values and claims to knowledge can be judged. The fact that fundamental disagreement persists about the location of this high point suggests that there is a plurality of legitimate ethical and political positions, and that our language and political concepts are valid only in terms of the context in which they are generated and employed. However, perhaps the most radical critique of concepts is developed in the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. This distinguishes between 'conventional' truth, which constitutes nothing more than a literary convention in that it is based upon a willingness amongst people to use concepts in a particular way, and 'absolute' truth, which involves the penetration of reality through direct experience and so transcends conceptualisation. In this view, thinking of all kinds amounts to a projection imposed upon reality, and therefore constitutes a form of delusion. If we mistake words for things we are in danger, as the Zen saying puts it, of mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

Further reading

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