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Concepts and Method in Social Science

The tradition of Giovanni Sartori

**Edited by
David Collier and John Gerring**

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Concepts and Method in Social Science

Careful work with concepts is a cornerstone of good social science methodology. *Concepts and Method in Social Science* demonstrates the crucial role of concepts, providing a timely contribution that draws both on the classic contributions of Giovanni Sartori and the writing of a younger generation of scholars.

In this volume, major writings of Sartori are juxtaposed with other work that exemplifies important approaches to concept analysis. The book is organized in three sections:

- **Part I: Sartori on concepts and method** – including an examination of the necessary logical steps in moving from conceptualization to measurement, and the relationships among meanings, terms, and observations.
- **Part II: Extending the Sartori tradition** – prominent scholars analyze five key ideas in concept analysis: revolution, culture, democracy, peasants, and institutionalization.
- **Part III: In the academy and beyond** – an engaging autobiographical essay written by Giovanni Sartori and reflections from former students provide a unique context in which to situate this varied and rigorous discussion of concept analysis and qualitative methods.

Concepts and Method in Social Science is an accessible text that is well suited to advanced undergraduates and postgraduates, providing a distinct and coherent introduction to comparative political analysis.

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Introduction¹

David Collier and John Gerring

Giovanni Sartori has long been an eminent scholar in the study of democracy and political parties, as well as in research on methodology. He is a leading voice in the study of social science concepts, and his influence is seen in a continuing stream of methodological publications that reflect his contributions.² Sartori's work has wide resonance in Europe, the United States, Latin America, and beyond. Although his substantive studies of democracy and parties continue to be available in English,³ no publication brings together his writings on concepts and methods for an English-speaking audience. Such a publication is now all the more overdue, given the centrality of Sartori's work to the field of qualitative methods – which has recently gained new vitality in political science.

The present volume brings together Sartori's major writings on concepts, method, and comparison, along with examples of scholarship by analysts whose work exemplifies the analytic gains achieved by close attention to concepts. Though in part a tribute to Sartori, this book is not a *Festschrift*.⁴ Rather, it republishes a set of writings in this methodological tradition – some substantially revised and adapted for publication here.

Sartori's career

Giovanni Sartori's education and earliest scholarship fall under the rubric of political philosophy. Yet over time, he became better known as an empirical political scientist, and his research on political parties, constitutions, and democracy has left a strong imprint in mainstream journals of political science. He is one of the founders of the contemporary subfield of comparative politics, yet his empirical forays have never lost their theoretical edge or historical underpinnings.

Sartori was born in Florence in 1924. Very inconveniently, he reached his majority – and draft age – just as the crumbling Italian fascist regime was in its final struggle and eagerly sought new military recruits. Motivated by an understandable aversion to joining this struggle on behalf of the government, Sartori went into hiding in a secret room of his family's home, at the risk of being shot on the spot if discovered. Thus sequestered until this regime fell, he passed his time reading Hegel, Croce, and other classics, thereby taking his first major step into political theory. This tale is told, with evident humor, by Sartori himself (Chapter 13, this volume).

2 *David Collier and John Gerring*

After the war, Sartori pursued graduate work at the University of Florence, receiving his degree in social and political science (1946). Shortly thereafter, he became an assistant professor of the history of modern philosophy at Florence, from 1950 to 1956. At that time, the university had a faculty of political sciences; in point of fact, this faculty encompassed teaching in law, history, economics, statistics, geography, and philosophy – but not what would be called political science today. In 1956, Sartori succeeded in having political science added to the purview of this faculty, and managed to have his own appointment moved to this newly created field. In doing so, he established the discipline in Italy and launched his trajectory as the leading Italian political scientist. This trajectory was also evident in his later role as the founding and managing editor of the *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* (1971–2003), which is the main disciplinary journal in Italy, thus continuing his role as architect of Italian political science.

Sartori's close involvement in the US scholarly community began in the second half of the 1960s, when he held visiting professorships at Harvard and Yale. His continuing engagement in the US academy is reflected in his appointment as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in 1971–72, and his election as a Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1975. In 1976, he was appointed as a professor of political science at Stanford, a position he held until 1979. In that year he became the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, where he taught from 1979 to 1994. He is now Albert Schweitzer Professor Emeritus.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Sartori was active in the intellectual movement that reshaped the field of comparative politics, collaborating with a large group of scholars including Gabriel Almond, David Apter, Samuel Beer, Robert Dahl, Harry Eckstein, Samuel Huntington, Joseph LaPalombara, Roy Macridis, Fred Riggs, and Henry Teune. Among these colleagues, Sartori was a distinctively European voice, and he played a defining role in setting a basic agenda for the methodology of comparative analysis. He was also active in international scholarly collaboration. For example, from its founding in 1970, Sartori was an important member of the Committee on Political Sociology of the International Political Science Association, which opened new avenues of research in comparative and international studies. This group included Hans Daalder, Mattei Dogan, S. N. Eisenstadt, Juan Linz, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Stein Rokkan. The years at Columbia saw a central continuing engagement in research on parties, democracy, constitutions, and methods, as well as a critical contribution to graduate teaching (Chapter 14). In retirement, Sartori remains actively engaged in the social sciences both in Europe and the US, as well as being a leading commentator on Italian politics.

Methodological contributions: the basic challenge

The biblical story about the Tower of Babel, which offers an explanation for the fragmentation of human language, is an apt metaphor for the confusion of language in the social sciences. It is fitting, therefore, that Sartori adopted it for the title of a

major essay (Chapter 3). We have also incorporated this image on the cover of this volume.

Sartori stands at the forefront among scholars who have tackled problems of conceptual confusion. His work poses many questions: What is the basic structure of the concepts in comparative social science? What analytic and practical tools are most useful for working with these concepts? Can uniform standards for concept usage be formulated? How does one persuade scholars to follow these standards?

Sartori's interest in these questions is strikingly reflected in the first book in which he moves beyond the initial concern with political theory. Its arresting title, *Democrazia e definizioni (Democracy and Definitions)* (1957), signals his recurring juxtaposition of basic methodological concerns and his substantive focus on democracy and political parties. In numerous subsequent publications, Sartori has continued to address these central questions. He has sought to provide a rigorous approach to methodology – a rigor grounded in the careful use of language, rather than in mathematics. He viewed qualitative work with concepts as essential to achieving such rigor in both qualitative and quantitative research.

We find it helpful to divide into five components Sartori's efforts to pursue this methodological agenda: (1) the foundational statement contained in his *APSR* article on "Concept Misformation and Comparative Politics"; (2) the historical depth of Sartori's thinking about methods; (3) the formulation of rules and procedures for structuring the interplay among concepts, terms, and empirical observations; (4) arguments concerning the logic of inquiry; and (5) his long-term concern with the relation between concept formation, and quantitative methods.

Point of departure: concept misformation

Sartori's article "Concept misformation in comparative politics" (Chapter 1) is widely recognized as a foundational statement within comparative politics and political science. In the 1960s and early 1970s, when basic concepts were being extended to political systems across the globe, Sartori provided criteria for thinking about this process of "conceptual traveling," and for avoiding the potential problem of "conceptual stretching." He accomplished this through his now famous discussion of the interplay between the "intension" of a concept, i.e., the meaning it calls forth, and its "extension," i.e., the range of cases to which it can appropriately be applied. Here, Sartori distinguished among low-level concepts, which may be well matched to the contextual specificity of particular countries; medium-level concepts, which may be suited to comparisons within world regions; and high-level concepts, which are useful for broader comparisons. The latter are rightly valued for their role in formulating general theories. Yet Sartori warned that if our concepts become too general, they may be subject to "theoretical vaporization." They may suffer from "defective denotation," in that they cease to offer productive empirical differentiation.

Another important priority in the "Concept Misformation" essay is that careful work with concepts should precede efforts at measurement. Indeed, it is all too easy to construct indicators without careful consideration of what they are measuring.

This problem is addressed through reasoning about a dichotomous form of the concept being measured. Sartori advises scholars to address the question “What is?” before asking “How much?” Thus, meaning before measurement; quality before quantity. This reasoning builds a strong foundation for a graded understanding of the concept being operationalized.

Finally, in formulating his agenda in the “Concept Misformation” essay, Sartori urges scholars to strike an appropriate balance: avoiding the trap of being either an *overconscious* thinker paralyzed by concern with methods, or an *unconscious* thinker oblivious to issues of method. A more appropriate position is that of the *conscious* thinker, who grasps the methodological issues, thereby improving research – without being trapped by excessive preoccupation with methods.

Historical depth

Sartori’s methodological contributions are firmly anchored in his knowledge of Western political thought. This facet of his work is reflected in his essay “What Is Politics?” (Chapter 2), which addresses this question by drawing extensively on classical political thought, as well as on the etymology of concepts derived from Latin and Greek. Given his early training and initial faculty positions in philosophy, this focus is hardly surprising.

In addressing the meaning of social science concepts, Sartori returned time and again to their classical origins. He expresses dismay over the loss of etymological anchorage in the methodological work of scholars who lack classical training – an unhappy state that describes most of us today. This dismay is forcefully articulated in “The Tower of Babel” (Chapter 3). In this respect, Sartori plays a bridging role among empirical analysis, the field of comparative politics, and political theory in the classical mode.

Rules and procedures

Establishing explicit rules and procedures for coordinating *concepts*, *terms*, and *observations* is another central point of concern (Chapters 3 and 4). Sartori’s rules and procedures build on careful differentiation among alternative forms of definition; the distinction between synonymy and antonymy; and his many warnings about problems in concept usage, including ambiguity (versus univocality), boundlessness, undenotativeness, and vagueness. He is convinced that key terms and concepts, once defined, are too often used inconsistently – a concern reiterated in the work of other authors in this volume, e.g., Collier and Levitsky (Chapter 10).⁵ Sartori advocates reconstructing the concepts used in a given study by collecting representative definitions, extracting their component attributes, and forming matrices that present – for example – the contrasts in concept usage employed by different authors in a given literature. Good examples of this reconstruction are found both in Kotowski and in Kurtz (Chapters 8 and 11).

Sartori’s concern with rules and procedures leads him to explore the wider semantic field – i.e., the broader set of terms and concepts – within which a given

concept is situated. He argues that innovations in terms and meanings should not unsettle this semantic field by creating confusion, overlap, or ambiguity among the constellation of related terms. Since concepts are inevitably nested within this larger field, it must be considered whenever a term is being defined. Concepts are inseparable from the loom of language.

The discussion of rules also extends to Sartori's influential arguments about the ladder of abstraction.⁶ Building on Frege and other logicians, Sartori views social science concepts through a classificatory lens. Concepts ought to be ordered through their definitions by *genus et differentia*,⁷ with subordinate concepts having smaller extensions (fields of referents) and larger intensions (number of defining traits). This sets up an inverse relationship between the intension and extension of a concept.⁸ Vertical movement up and down the "ladder of abstraction" becomes a key tool for building careful comparisons across diverse contexts. Concept definitions should only be as specific as is appropriate to their desired extension.

Finally, Sartori advocates minimal definitions – i.e., those that capture what are understood as core (necessary and sufficient) attributes of a phenomenon. Minimal definitions are thus intended to exclude accompanying or varying properties, whose relation to the core concept seems more productively treated as the focus of empirical investigation rather than as a matter of definition. This approach is explored by Gerring and Barresi (Chapter 9), and the role of minimal definitions in the literature on the third wave of democracy is made clear by Collier and Levitsky (Chapter 10).

Sartori's discussion of rules and procedures springs from a rigorous optimism that scholars can order concepts, terms, definitions, and observations in an analytically productive way. This optimism is central to the contemporary field of comparative politics, and is all the more compelling because it carefully takes into account the heterogeneity of the political world we study. Sartori's rules and procedures seek to address that heterogeneity, rather than sweeping it under the carpet.

And yet we may wonder: can the methodology of concept analysis and concept usage be governed by strict procedures? In quantitative methods and statistics, one finds many rules. Are they equally plausible in qualitative work? We suggest two responses. First, rule-making in *quantitative* methods may be less productive – setting less of a gold standard – than is often presumed (Brady and Collier 2004). One must beware of overdrawing the contrast between quantitative and qualitative methods in this respect. Second, it is worthwhile for scholars to seek standards in working with concepts, even if those standards cannot always be met. The statements by Sartori's former students (Chapter 14) show that the quest for standards can be substantially advanced, for example, by careful teaching.

Broader questions of method and logic of inquiry

Sartori's concerns extend, of course, beyond the specificities of concept analysis to wider issues of methods and logic of inquiry. Several of these concerns are reflected in his pungent article "Comparing and Miscomparing" (Chapter 5). Here, he considers the role of comparison in causal inference, underscoring the centrality

of this objective to the entire field. He draws together earlier lines of argument in exploring the question of what is comparable. Relatedly, he discusses how, due to parochialism, scholars may draw from another context of analysis a concept that is inappropriate for their own domain of research. In this new setting, the concept may not refer to anything at all. He considers case studies, underscoring their contribution to generating hypotheses.

Sartori likewise addresses the troubling issue of incommensurability, which in the present context involves the challenge of finding conceptualizations appropriate for diverse cases – i.e., that successfully establishes analytic equivalence. The concern with incommensurability thus frames, in the broadest terms, the issue of conceptual stretching. He observes that this concern potentially challenges the very enterprise of comparative politics. Sartori makes it clear that we have no comprehensive solution to incommensurability, yet a practical solution is possible. Country specialists should avoid dwelling excessively on the uniqueness of “their cases.” In doing so, they fail to place them in a wider comparative perspective – and, indeed, they would thereby make a grave mistake, notwithstanding the inevitable challenge of establishing equivalence. In parallel, broad comparativists should take into account detailed knowledge of specific cases. In addressing this detailed knowledge, they may discover that they should refine their own more general concepts. Overall, the solution is not to arrive at a definitive conclusion, but to applaud practical efforts to address incommensurability by juxtaposing the general and the specific.

Concept formation and quantification

Sartori argues forcefully that careful work with a dichotomous form of concepts should be a foundation for quantification. Otherwise, quantitative analysis lacks sound conceptual foundations. To reiterate the framing stated above, the questions “What is?” and “How much?” should be addressed in that order. A pointed expression of Sartori’s concern is found in his statement that “statistical technology cannot surrogate what an atrophied formation of concepts does not provide.” Sartori’s position here might be seen as hostile toward much quantitative research in comparative politics, and in political science more broadly.

We do not agree. First of all, Sartori’s insistence on providing strong conceptual foundations for quantitative analysis – based on a categorical understanding of the relevant concepts – is entirely congruent with standard concerns of measurement theory. Take, for example, the form of measurement validation considered necessary with a technique such as factor analysis. It is standard to presume that the quantitative measures produced by this statistical method should be subject to “content validation.” Thus, the indicators that go into the quantitative measure should plausibly be elements of the concept being measured, i.e., they should correspond to the “content” of that concept. Factor analysis thus depends on an initial differentiation between what is part of the concept and what is not – i.e., on initially reasoning in dichotomous terms concerning what the concept is “about.”

Approaching these issues from another perspective, Collier et al. (2008) have shown that the careful construction of “higher” levels of measurement – i.e.,

interval, ratio, and absolute scales – is dependent on an initial, dichotomous categorization of the phenomenon under analysis. Relatedly, Collier and Levitsky (Chapter 10) argue that if we are to make sense of the more-or-less gradations they associate with “part–whole” hierarchies, we must have some initial, categorical understanding that addresses the question “Part of what?”

Sartori’s position on concept formation as an underpinning for measurement thus coincides with important ideas about validity, levels of measurement, and measurement theory. Further, it should be underscored that Sartori is open to the option of a mathematization of political science, *if* it is constructed on a conceptually rigorous foundation. Of course, a great many formal modelers would likewise insist on a foundation of careful conceptual work. They would certainly agree with the stipulation of “if” in Sartori’s formulation.

Organization of this volume

The chapters below present major examples of Sartori’s work on concepts and methods, as well as essays by other authors who extend his ideas. In this introduction, we have already discussed key arguments in his essays on “Concept Misformation,” “What Is Politics?,” “The Tower of Babel,” “Guidelines for Concept Analysis,” and “Comparing and Miscomparing.” The reader is invited to delve further into these essays in Part I of the volume (Chapters 1 to 5). Chapter 6, “Further Observations on Concept Formation, Definitions, and Models,” presents excerpts from four essays that further develop important themes in Sartori’s work. In “Democracy: ‘What Is’ vs. ‘How Much’” and in “From Classification to Measurement,” Sartori concisely articulates his basic arguments about building measurement – i.e., the concern with more and less – on careful concept formation. “Politics as Collectivized Decisions” is an exercise in concept clarification in which Sartori explores different types of decision making and argues that politics distinctively entails collectivized, and not collective, decisions. Likewise, “What Is a Model?” is in part an exercise in concept clarification – exploring the relationship among models, frameworks, and mental constructs – while it also considers the ways in which they should be understood as explanatory. At the same time, Sartori warns against a model mania that fails to distinguish between what he views as real models – for example, the idea of equilibrium or the Downsian model of party competition – as opposed to the evocation of “model” simply as a form of verbal boasting.

Part II presents studies that extend and refine different strands within the Sartori tradition. Gary Goertz (Chapter 7) examines a fundamental point of departure in Sartori’s work on concepts: the idea of intension and extension and its application to the challenges of comparative research. Among the questions Goertz considers is the place of ideal types within the intension–extension framework. His chapter also examines specific parts of the analysis offered by Kotowski, Collier and Levitsky, and Kurtz (Chapters 8, 10, and 11), thereby introducing arguments that are developed later in the volume.

The rest of Part II focuses on important social science concepts – revolution, culture, democracy, peasant, and institutionalization – while also exemplifying

important ideas of concept analysis. Christoph Kotowski (Chapter 8) engages the concept of revolution, employing a variety of analytic tools, including the matrix of meanings and authors advocated by Sartori, to untangle this concept.

The next two chapters address minimal definitions and conceptual hierarchies. Focusing on the concept of culture, John Gerring and Paul A. Barresi (Chapter 9) juxtapose ideas about ideal types and minimal definitions, thereby exploring the form of definition preferred by Sartori, as well as extending Goertz's discussion of ideal types. David Collier and Steven Levitsky (Chapter 10) push further the idea of conceptual hierarchies. They suggest that Sartori's ladder of abstraction (also called the ladder of generality) can be seen as a "kind hierarchy," which they contrast with a "part-whole hierarchy." This contrast usefully links the discussion with wider arguments about conceptual structure and conceptual change. They illustrate this distinction through an examination of the concept of democracy, as employed in studies of the third wave of democratization in the final decades of the twentieth century. This chapter underscores the value of constructing the analysis of gradations on an initial dichotomous framing of concepts.

The final chapters in Part II demonstrate how careful work with concepts – and especially disaggregation – can clarify and improve causal inference. To use Sartori's terms, through unpacking the intension of their concepts, these authors arrive at a modified extension that groups cases differently, yielding improved leverage in evaluating causal claims. Marcus J. Kurtz (Chapter 11) disaggregates the concept of peasant, thus providing new insight into three major lines of analysis focused on the role of peasants in producing revolutions: the moral economy, political economy, and Marxist perspectives. He unpacks the intension and provides new differentiation of the extension, thereby distinguishing alternative kinds of peasants. Kurtz shows that important parts of the apparent divergence among these explanatory approaches did not involve theoretical differences, but rather a focus on different cases, which came into sharper focus with his disaggregated approach. Writing on institutionalization, Levitsky (Chapter 12) likewise unpacks the concept. In examining explanations for the transformation of political parties, he shows that what appeared to be conflicting accounts in fact derived from different meanings of this concept.

Part III begins with an engaging and informative autobiographical essay, in which Sartori recounts different phases in his career and in the evolution of his thought (Chapter 13). A full biography and bibliography is also provided in the concluding portion of the volume (Chapter 15).

To offer a picture of Sartori the teacher, Part III also includes reflections by scholars who studied methods with him at Columbia University, an experience which they attest had a lasting impact on their analytic skills, their insight into working with concepts, and their careers (Chapter 14). Apparently, for more than a few students who took Sartori's course on "social science concepts," it sounded in principle like an easy class. Yet they were in for a surprise. They describe Sartori as austere and stern in his teaching style, often demanding, and always exacting. Students' ideas were routinely dissected in class meetings, and occasionally Sartori expressed his dismay over their ignorance of Latin and Greek, which

limited their capacity to grasp the historical and etymological roots of concepts under discussion.

Yet Sartori was courteous and charming in his teaching. While rigorous and sometimes intimidating, his style is described as gracious and his mentorship unfailing. He would enter the classroom gallantly, wearing tailored Italian suits and clutching his worn briefcase under his arm. With old-world charm and a dry sense of humor, he presided over the class with an elegance of bearing and of mind that fascinated the students. He proved to be a remarkable mentor, with a deep and generous commitment to those with whom he worked closely. Sartori was, and continues to be, a formidable presence, and at the same time a supportive and encouraging teacher and colleague.

Notes

- 1 For their skilled contributions to the task of transcribing, assembling, coordinating, and checking the chapters in this volume, we are sincerely grateful to Nora Archambeau, Rebecca Baran-Rees, Mauricio Benítez, Erica Hill, Jennifer Jennings, Josephine Marks, Reilly O’Neal, Piero Tortola, and Miranda Yaver. Valuable comments on this introduction were provided by Robert Adcock and Taylor Boas. This volume has been prepared in collaboration with the Consortium for Qualitative Research Methods, as well as the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research of the Moynihan Institute of Global Affairs, Maxwell School, Syracuse University.
- 2 See Chapters 7 to 12 in the present volume. A small sampling of related work includes Adcock (2005), Adcock and Collier (2001), Capoccia (2002), Collier and Adcock (1999), Collier and Mahon (1993), Gerring (2001), Goertz (2006), and Schedler (1998, 1999).
- 3 Sartori (1987, 2005).
- 4 *A Festschrift* has been published in Italian (Pasquino 2005).
- 5 Pamela Paxton’s (2000) study of inconsistencies in definitions of democracy – a study that fits nicely in the tradition of concept analysis discussed here – offers an outstanding illustration of this problem. She discusses prominent authors who formulated a definition of democracy that included universal suffrage. Yet when these authors analyzed particular countries, at key points their focus extended beyond cases of universal suffrage to encompass countries that had only male suffrage. This failure to hold to initial definitions strongly influenced their conclusions about the emergence and consequences of democracy.
- 6 This has also been called a ladder of generality (Collier and Mahon 1993; Goertz, Chapter 7). Collier and Levitsky (Chapter 10) frame this in terms of a kind hierarchy. As Collier and Levitsky argue, these alternative labels simply provide alternative perspectives on exactly the same vertical structure of concepts.
- 7 That is to say, in a conceptual structure in which more generic, superordinate levels stand in a hierarchical relation with more specific, subordinate levels.
- 8 Sartori strongly emphasizes the idea of inverse variation, while also noting that this pattern does not always pertain and “should not be understood strictly” (Chapter 4, n. 40).

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