Download date: 15. Feb. 2025

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Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Berenskötter, F., & Guzzini, S. (2024). *Contested essential concepts*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). DIIS Working Paper Vol. 2024 No. 02

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CONTESTED ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS

Felix Berenskötter & Stefano Guzzini

Acknowledgements
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This Working Paper is forthcoming as:
Felix Berenskötter & Stefano Guzzini, 'Contested Essential Concepts in International Relations', in Cameron Thies, ed., *Handbook of International Relations* (Cheltenham, UK et al.: Edward Elgar Publ.).

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DIIS WORKING PAPER 2024: 02
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www.diis.dk
ISBN 978-87-7236-159-8 (pdf)
DIIS publications can be downloaded free of charge from www.diis.dk
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Felix Berenskötter & Stefano Guzzini

DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This Working Paper explores the notion of 'essential concepts' and their contestation with an eye on the field of International Relations (IR). The title plays on W.B. Gallie's famous essay to pursue the argument that a debate over the meaning of an essential concept has analytical, normative and political value. The Working Paper is structured around three questions: what are concepts? What makes a concept essential? How should we think about contestation? Starting from the position that concepts play a central role in knowledge production and are embedded in (meta-)theoretical logics that shape their meaning, it discusses how contestation plays out in three domains: abstract and normative theoretical knowledge; explanatory and empirical knowledge; and practical knowledge. The chapter concludes with the argument that meaningful contestation requires translation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the notion of 'essential concepts' and their contestation in the field of International Relations (IR). The title plays on W.B. Gallie's (1956) famous notion of 'essentially contested concepts'. Reversing the order of the terms may actually come closer to Gallie's initial intention. His essay has often been reduced to the idea of the irresolvable value plurality that informs central political concepts and, hence, never the twain shall meet. But that is not quite what Gallie argued. For some types of concepts, so his claim, there may be no single meaning or ultimate content available – they are *essentially* contested. And yet meaningful arguments about their best usage still occur – they are essentially *contested*. Gallie's position does not stand for a mathematical or unified higher language to which all can be reduced, as in the positivist ambition (well expounded in Oppenheim 1981); nor does it stand for a pure form of incommensurability in which no meaningful contact can take place, despite the general reception of his argument. For Gallie, the awareness that concepts can be essentially contested becomes an invitation to pluralism, openness and humility in our use of concepts and conversations about them (see also Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006, 234).

Taking up his cue, this paper suggests that a debate over the meaning of an essential concept has analytical, normative and political value. But how is this form of contestation, when not relying on an *a priori* universalism, to be understood? What makes which concepts essential? Indeed, what are concepts in

the first place? The following will address these three questions in reverse order. It outlines how this plays out in three domains of knowledge production: abstract and normative theoretical knowledge; explanatory and empirical knowledge; and practical knowledge. In the final part, the paper discusses conditions for meaningful contestation, with a focus on the importance of translation.

WHAT IS A CONCEPT AND WHAT MAKES IT ESSENTIAL?

Understanding concepts

Concepts play a fundamental role in the understanding of reality and its explanation. Crudely put, a concept can be defined as a mental image which meaningfully organizes reality, as perceived through sensory experiences, in the mind. Whether we think of them as cognitive properties of individuals or as socially created and sustained, concepts are heuristic devices, or building blocks, with which knowledge about the world is constituted and developed.[1] Indeed, we might say they are the condition for the possibility of knowledge, the analytical lenses which inform the subjects/objects and give meaning to observation. As such, choosing and engaging core concepts is an integral and important part of research and its communication.

This understanding and, more generally, the renewed attention to concepts in the humanities and social sciences is informed by the 'linguistic turn', which considers language as not only representing social reality but also interacting with, or intervening in, it. It thus has a semantic component, which directs attention to the linguistic context in which concepts gain meaning, and a pragmatic component, which reads concepts as meaning in action. What a concept means is related to what it can do in a (political) discourse. Consequently, concepts are entry points for understanding these discourses and their evolution.

This sensitivity to the pragmatic function of concepts involves an awareness of changing historical contexts that inform the concepts' meanings and roles. Studies in the field of IR have shown how the meaning of key concepts such as sovereignty, the state, or war has evolved over time. Arguably, the most wide-ranging project in conceptual history was undertaken by Reinhart Koselleck and colleagues in the 1960s and 70s, published in the eight-volume collection *Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany* (Koselleck, Conze, and Brunner 2004 [1972]). While the Cambridge School of

[1] In Germanic languages, concepts refer to 'that which makes us grasp the world/phenomena' or 'get a grip on the world/phenomena'. See: Begriff, begrepp, begripp, and so on.

intellectual history put its effort into carefully reconstructing how a concept is used within a particular historical context so as to avoid the literally anachronistic imposition of present-day language on different times and contexts (e.g. Pocock 1973; Skinner 2002), Koselleck's *Bielefeld School* had the ambition of tracing patterns and transformations in conceptual language over time. A key insight of all this literature is that concepts gain their meaning through the socio-political and historical context in which they are used.

Sensitivity to the interrelation between context and meaning prompts awareness of the way concepts are embedded in their respective languages, including theoretical languages. Concepts are to our analytical narratives or theories what words are to languages, which is to say that the formation of concepts and the formation of theories are intrinsically connected, or 'interdependent' (Carlsnaes 1981, 7). For, as Bulmer (1979, 658) reminds us, 'concepts such as the "protestant ethic" or "marginal utility" derive their meaning from the part they play in the theory in which they are embedded, and from the role in that theory itself.' The study of the history of concepts, their meaning and role in political discourse, similarly problematizes the interconnection between theory and concept. Koselleck (2011 [1972], 16) saw the purpose of his project of conceptual history as being to 'comprehend the process by which experiences came to be registered in concepts and—as far as possible—to identify the theories included in such concepts'. Hence, trying to grasp how a concept acquires meaning within and across socio-political spaces necessarily slides into the task of understanding its place within theories. [2]

In this relationship between concept and (theoretical) language, three clarifications are in order. First, while normally linked to a word, a concept is more than a word. Concepts have the task of bundling in one expression that which is (considered) essential to a phenomenon. It can be associated with different words in different linguistic contexts (for instance: power, puissance, poder, Macht, Kraft) and also be expressed visually or materially (for instance, through architecture). Second, the meaning of a concept is always related to the meaning of other concepts. For instance, peace is understood through its relation to war, stability, justice, or harmony. These form what Koselleck (2006, 101) called a 'concept web' (*Begriffsnetz*), what William Connolly (1993 [1974]) referred to as 'cluster concepts', and what Giovanni Sartori (1984) defined as a 'semantic field'. Third, while most concepts are abstract, or able to connect to a high level of abstraction, concepts are not theories in themselves. A concept has an important heuristic function, but it does not offer an analytical narrative or a causal argument, often seen as a central

[2] For a discussion of different approaches to concept analyses, see Berenskoetter (2017).

aspect of theory. Thus, concept analysis alone cannot provide a new theory. In a similar vein, having several researchers converge around a concept does not ensure that they come to share the underlying theory. And, if they do not, attempts to merge analytical insights are unlikely to add up and may even obfuscate tensions (for such a critique, see Ringmar 2014).

What makes concepts 'essential'?

To understand what makes a concept 'essential', we must ask: essential for whom or what? As noted earlier, concepts are fundamental for the construction of knowledge, which for the field of IR includes understanding relations between political collectives and the organization and contestation of world orders. To go beyond this rather general answer, we need to consider the role(s) or function(s) that a concept has in particular contexts. Below, we differentiate between three domains to outline in what sense they consider concepts as 'essential' and how they are 'contested'. To avoid the impression of compartmentalization, however, it is useful to start with a wider angle.

As scholars, we might be tempted to place concepts primarily within the academic language of theories or analytical narratives and derive their essential nature from their central place in our theories and explanations. In the field of IR, realism treats 'fear' as a core ontological assumption and 'power' as an essential variable to explain the behaviour of international actors. But these concepts are also used in ordinary everyday language and political discourse. Rogers Brubaker and Frederik Cooper (2000) distinguish between categories of analysis, which are used to designate concepts used in academic research, and categories of practice, which are 'developed and deployed by ordinary social actors…and by political entrepreneurs'. Whereas some scholars might not be particularly concerned about ordinary language and consider it irrelevant for how scholars form and use their analytical tools, Brubaker and Cooper (2000, 4) note that important concepts are 'marked by close reciprocal connection and mutual influence between their practical and analytical uses'.

In fact, most substantive scholarship on concepts suggests that these two languages cannot be viewed in isolation. This is well captured in what Koselleck calls 'basic' or 'fundamental' concepts [*Grundbegriffe* in German]. For Koselleck, a concept is basic if it plays a key role in our socio-political language and is considered so important that we cannot do without it; in his words, it is 'indispensable to any formulation of the most urgent issues of a given time' (Koselleck 1996, 64). Such concepts permeate different domains of knowledge: They underpin the leading terms [*Leitbegriffe*] we use to categorize and grasp (links between) fundamental structures, processes and events; they include

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).

Koselleck's project also directs particular attention to the central role such concepts play during moments of historical change. It looks at how the emergence or transformation of a concept correlated with the discontinuity of political, social and economic structures, and how and why certain experiences and structural changes were understood in particular ways within society. Koselleck shows the ability of key concepts to grasp, or make sense of, fundamental changes in the socio-political environment and, at the same time, reveals the role they play in bringing about such changes (Koselleck 2004 [1972]: 86). This interaction may well take place outside academia, as actors in all kinds of social environments look for new concepts or redefine existing ones to better grasp certain phenomena or intervene in politics.

In short, prominence in both academic and non-academic contexts is an indicator for what makes a concept 'essential'. Moreover, a concept that has this indispensable function is political. One might even go so far as to say that the effort of attaching meanings to key concepts is 'the political par excellence' (Ish-Shalom 2021b, 8). The political nature of an essential concept certainly raises the stakes of reading it in one way rather than another (Koselleck 1996, 65). Thus, whether and why a concept is understood in similar ways or takes on different meanings requires closer attention.

Why are concepts contested?

Contestation is an interaction between users of (what they consider) the 'same' concept. As such, 'contestability' is not an innate quality of a concept's character; it is not a structural property. It emerges because a concept is conceived of and used by actors in ways that lead to a disagreement over its proper or best use. As the meaning of any concept is not fixed but open to interpretation, different readings are always possible. For this to turn into a contestation, or dispute, two sides attached to different readings would both need to maintain that theirs is better (as in more accurate or useful). A substantive contestation involves an informed critique of a particular reading and a sound defence in response.

How we use concepts and consider different meanings and the stakes involved depends on whether we treat a concept as an abstract signifier, a tool for empirical analysis, or as something that constitutes socio-political reality. Before outlining what contestation looks like in these different knowledge domains, it is useful to

sketch Gallie's account of why concepts might be 'essentially contested' and the counter-position articulated in response.

In his seminal article, Gallie (1956) picked up the observation that scholars using the 'same' concept in different ways are often unable to agree which meaning is better, or more accurate. Pointing to 'endless disputes' over concepts such as art, democracy, justice, or religious norms, he offered an explanation why it often seems impossible to bridge different readings through rational discussion. Among Gallie's seven conditions underpinning essential contestedness (Gallie 1956, 171–80), there are two standout reasons for why disputes over the meaning of a concept cannot be solved: (1) readings are influenced by ideological positions, which renders empirical evidence irrelevant as a means of resolving the dispute, and (2) any attempt to find a 'core' meaning in a historical exemplar which may have the agreed status of the 'origin' of the concept under discussion will find that this exemplar is vague and complex and, thus, does not provide a 'core' meaning and cannot serve as the arbiter of a dispute. In other words, essential contestedness arises out of a combination of the complex internal logic/configuration of a concept and its evolution in different, possibly incompatible, knowledge systems in which the participants of the dispute are invested.

This account, indeed the very notion that the meaning of a concept can be eternally disputed, has met fierce resistance by neopositivists, who insist that it is possible to define a concept in ways that can reasonably command general acceptance. For them, the idea of essential contestability is either a surrender to relativism or a confusion between normative and empirical theory, or both. Keith Dowding (2011) reflects this view when stating that 'without some common set of agreements about terms and their entailments, all we have are different theories' that cannot be assessed against each other. Theoretical sterility ensues. Alternatively, this contestedness may be due to 'our normative attitudes towards them' (Dowding 2011, 223): It is the mere effect of rival normative commitments, not unbridgeable empirical (true) accounts. People see the same world but judge it differently. Coming from a slightly different angle, David Baldwin opposed further reflection on contestability by maintaining that concepts are *not entirely* theory-dependent, which, according to him, opens the door to proposing a single conceptualization that is generally applicable (Baldwin 2016, 59, 62–66).

It is not difficult to see why academics committed to the ideal of an objective and value-free science do not accept that a debate over the meaning of, let's say, 'conflict' or 'cooperation' could be limited by the effect of theoretical frames or ideological positions. For this goes against the idea of a shared scientific language, prominently expressed in the effort to find a singular logic to scientific inquiry

across methodological approaches. Theories should not be barriers to this effort. The view that concepts are *partially* independent of, or can even be disconnected from, theory effectively holds that concepts can be defined relatively freely for the purpose of measurement as long as they promise explanatory purchase.[3] It also insists on the possibility of empirically comparing, or 'testing', concepts for their empirical validity within one evaluative framework. So even if there are disagreements about a concept, this position maintains that reasonable discussions should enable a common or most appropriate meaning to be found or the proof that one meaning is superior to another within a unified analysis.

What this comes down to is whether we accept that a concept's meaning is fully embedded in theoretical contexts that have their own language, logics and normative commitments,[4] or whether we maintain that reality can be accessed and meaningful knowledge be gained outside of our conceptual frames. A bit of independence, as suggested by Baldwin, is not possible; the logic of his own argument requires that concepts should be entirely independent of theories, and that everyone can reasonably agree on this. In many ways, this is a meta-theoretical debate, which we will not delve into here. It suffices to say that the position underpinning this essay is that essential concepts *are* embedded in the (meta-)theoretical logics that shape their meaning and from which they cannot be extricated (for this position, see Hollis 2002 [1994]; P.T. Jackson 2011).

This position also entails that the distinction between 'descriptive' and 'normative' concepts, which resonates in Dowding's gesture to 'attitudes', cannot be upheld. As Connolly notes, essential concepts provide sites through which debates over the character of the good life are pursued (Connolly 1993 [1974], 225). They enable us to grasp the world in both descriptive and normative ways, not least because 'to describe is to characterize a situation from the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards' (Connolly 1993 [1974], 23). Also, the co-constitutive nature of concepts and theories implies that the normative element cannot just be relegated to theory but is also integral to the concept. Koselleck makes this point when he argues that a concept's ability to guide thought and action is partly anchored in its temporality: Meanings are rooted in a stock of experiences and contain an aspirational outlook that raises 'innovative expectations' (Koselleck 2011 [1972]). These may not articulate a moral imperative, as found in concepts like justice, or security (Wæver 1995), but even a seemingly

[3] However, the invention of new words will not necessarily command much audience, as regular parlance is important for all communication, including scholarly communication (for this point, repeatedly, see Baldwin 1989).

[4] For conceptualizations of theory and theorising in the field of IR, see Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen and Colin Wight (2013), Guzzini (2013a), and Berenskoetter (2018).

neutral concept like 'interest' is tied to normative expectations (Connolly 1993 [1974], chapter 2).

None of this forecloses debate. Critique and conversations about different readings across knowledge domains *are* possible and, indeed, should be encouraged. The choice is not between searching for one unifying language or succumbing to relativism. That concepts mean different things across different theoretical languages does not imply that the theories cannot be assessed individually and against each other. Universal meta-theoretical language is not the only possible solution to contestedness. Rather, as discussed in the final section of this chapter, debates over conceptual meaning require translation. But for translations to work, we need to understand the different theoretical contexts/knowledge domains in which concepts are formed, used and debated.

WHERE AND HOW ARE CONCEPTS CONTESTED?

To grasp the nature of essential concepts and their modes of operation, it is fruitful to distinguish between three *contexts of theorization*, each forming a particular domain of knowledge and criteria for defending their respective validity claims: political and normative, explanatory and empirical, and everyday and practical. They follow different logics of justifying their claims and prompt different modes of contestation: targeting underlying theoretical and meta-theoretical assumptions, provincializing ideal-types, and de-naturalising the performative effects of concepts.

Contesting assumptions in political and normative theorization

Political and normative theorizing offers answers to questions about 'what is (the nature of) X' and 'how ought Y be?' Answering these questions will necessarily relate to the underlying ontological and/or normative assumptions of the respective theories. For the first type of questions, theories in the field of IR rely on concepts such as order, power, security, political economy, interests, the state, intervention, etc. as building blocks for developing and articulating theoretical frameworks. Conceptualizations are defended with regard to criteria of social and political theory. For the second question, theories rely on concepts such as justice, equality, freedom, care, dignity, and others, for justifying ethically preferable actions or societies. Here, validity claims are explicitly defended with regard to criteria in moral philosophy.

It is not surprising that scholars invested in different traditions of political and normative theory, informed by different experiences of the social world, different

cosmologies and normative commitments, may disagree about the meaning of a concept. That is easy to see for normative debates, where participants disagree over values. It also applies to political theory, where essential concepts are contested not only because they may be value-laden but because different theoretical traditions conceive of them in a *potentially* incompatible manner. This does not prevent debates. But problems arise when their core concepts are so fundamental that their meanings are not elaborated anymore but taken for granted and turned into assumptions.

As mentioned earlier, the meaning of an essential concept is always formed through a web of concepts in a semantic field and embedded in an underlying theory. Re-conceptualizations affect that semantic field and need to be consistent with the underlying theory. Accordingly, much of conceptual contestation is a kind of coherence check. The door for contestation opens when a new reading does not fully consider the impact on closely related concepts, the reasons for including some concepts in its web and excluding others, and the links between them. Engaging such a configuration is far more complicated than simply comparing two definitions, and it is often not clear whether the disagreement is about the same concept or about more than one. For instance, is 'power' the overall concept for a semantic field populated by authority, governance, domination, rule, or influence, among others? Or is it a concept on the same level within the semantic field (for a discussion, see Guzzini 2013b, 8–11)? It might be tempting in such cases to dismiss disagreement as mere confusion over complex configurations. Yet, because the composition of the concept web is informed by theory, this configuration cannot be understood without the theory in which it is embedded. Hence, disputes about essential concepts 'are surface manifestations of basic theoretical differences that reach to the core' (Connolly 1993 [1974], 21), and so must eventually lead back to the theoretical narrative in which a cluster is embedded. This pushes the debate to address not only the meaning of a concept but also the underlying theory. It plays on the coherence between concept and theory, using a redefinition of the former to also question the adequacy of the latter.

One example is Steven Lukes' famous introduction of a 'third face' of power to the debate on community power in the USA in the 1970s. Lukes criticized the existing community power literature by proposing a Gramsci-inspired third dimension of power, one in which power was exercised in a relation without observable conflict (Lukes 2004 [1974], 28). Lukes' idea was not simply to add another dimension and stir. He showed that this dimension was not truly understandable if authors stuck to the individualist and behaviouralist framework of analysis that characterized, for instance, the work of Robert Dahl (Dahl 1968). In doing so, Lukes put Dahl-inspired scholars before a choice. If they wanted to keep the consistency between a

concept and the theory in which it is embedded, they either had to update the theory to fit in the revised concept, as done to some extent by Brian Barry (2002, 2003), or deny the value of Lukes' re-conceptualization, as in Dowding (1996), who reframed the third dimension not as power but as 'systematic luck'. IR scholars have grappled with different conceptions of power in similar ways.[5]

A less prominent but equally telling example concerns disagreements over the conceptualization of peace. In IR, a range of readings emerge from the normative thrusts and logics of different theoretical narratives carrying the concept and the composition of its cluster: A realist is likely to conceive of peace as stability, understood as a balance of power, with a particular focus on great powers; theorists committed to a liberal framework would discuss peace in terms of a relationship marked by close trade links and a shared commitment to democratic governance; a Marxist would read it as a communist order in which capitalism and class-differences have been overcome. Each of these readings emerges out of a concept web embedded in an internally coherent theoretical narrative that is normative in its own way (Berenskoetter and Richmond 2016; Richmond 2020).[6] And these readings are not merely abstract contemplations but also play out in other knowledge domains, affecting how peaceful relations are identified and explained, and shaping policy and practices aimed at 'building' peace (Carey 2020). Challenging one of them by suggesting that another reading is more important or effective involves contesting an entire configuration of concepts and the logic linking them together.

Contesting assumptions and contextualizing ideal-types in empirical theorization

Contestation will follow different logics, whether the analysis is situated within a naturalist or interpretivist methodology. In naturalist (positivism-inspired) empirical theory, knowledge is the result of discovering regularities that are generalizable. In this process, concepts are treated exclusively as analytical categories that are essential for the definition of variables which then allow the construction of theoretical propositions (Goertz 2006, 1). Concepts-reduced-to-variables are at the heart of causal statements, or hypotheses, and thus serve as the core reference points in a constant conjunction or causal chain (such as 'if A then B', whereby both A and B would be the concepts qua variables). They are turned into tools for empirical analysis by being operationalized, and they serve as a data container that can be carried around the world to measure and classify

[5] For an early application of Lukes' three faces to IR, see Krause (1991). For an integration of Bourdieu and Foucault with Lukes' three dimensions in a way that changes the underlying social theory, see Guzzini (1993). For presenting a typology without following up on the theoretical level, see Barnett and Duvall (2005). See the discussion in Berenskoetter (2007).

[6] As IR theories are not fixed or perfect epistemic systems but evolving and incomplete trains of thought, challenges to the meaning content of a concept can also come from within a theoretical camp.

phenomena and to explain, for instance, different degrees of ‘development’ or ‘democratization’.

In this approach, discussions over a concept’s meaning rarely amount to contestations. Instead, they are seen more as an instrumental weighing of the usefulness of various definitions for comparative typologies (Sartori 1970, 1984) or causal analysis, whether concepts are defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (Gerring 2012, chap. 5) or family resemblance (Goertz 2006, chap. 2). This involves some careful discussion of, for instance, the intension–extension dilemma. On the one side, analysts need to avoid a too-comprehensive definition of a concept that stipulates a large number of criteria a phenomenon needs to meet. This risks leaving too few suitable empirical cases to fit the concept. On the other side, analysts need to avoid an overly minimalist definition that applies to a large number of phenomena, making it difficult to distinguish between empirical cases. The latter has also been called the risk of ‘conceptual stretching’ (Sartori 1970, 1991; Collier and Mahon 1993).

One of the problems with the instrumental approach to concepts taken by positivists is that it has the tendency to ignore their theoretical underbelly. Scholars in this tradition have criticized the impatience of colleagues who, in their effort to operationalize variables, brush aside conceptual issues as mere semantics to get on with the job of testing hypotheses (for instance, on the concept of power, see Baldwin 1985, 25). Although Sartori (2009 [1975]) himself warned against the forgetting of the history of concepts and their relation to philosophical tenets, and although Goertz (2006) insists in the ‘ontological’ character of all concept formation, as does Gerring’s (2012, 126–28) criterion of fecundity, their discussions remain disconnected from a consideration of the underlying meta-theoretical and theoretical assumptions.

In IR, one prominent example is the codification of threat assessments in the analysis of security. Arnold Wolfers (1952) pointed to the ambiguity of the concept of (national) security early on. Yet, for a long time, the field of IR assumed a dominant realist reading tied to the idea that threats to security are objectively measurable on the basis of existing military resources and their ability to attack the territory of a given state. In the 1990s, scholars started to broaden the referent to include other sectors, like the economy or society, as well as a subjective dimension of ‘enmity’ and ‘amity’, connecting security to a wider range of political problems. This conceptual move ended up contesting not only the conventional meaning of security, but also the underlying realist theory (for contributions to this debate, see Buzan 1991; Haftendorn 1991; Baldwin 1997; Huysmans 1998). In this case, contestation appeared at the level of theoretical assumptions, moving beyond a naturalist, that is, a merely definitional and

theory-independent approach, to concept formation (see also Bevir and Kedar 2008).

In contrast to the positivist approach, interpretivist empirical theorizing is more sensitive to the contextual nature of meaning and attuned to the constitutive function of concepts and theories as the condition for the possibility of knowledge. Although usually interested in the idiosyncratic, interpretivist knowledge also travels, albeit in a different manner than positivist one. Rather than seeking empirical regularities that can be generalized, interpretivists move and compare knowledge from one meaning-context to another by establishing abstractions that contain the central constitutive features of phenomena. One prominent vehicle is ideal-types (see also the discussion in P.T. Jackson 2017). Whereas concepts-as-variables travel by generalizing regularities, hence looking for similarity across the universe of cases, concepts-as-ideal-types travel by providing frameworks of analysis with which relevant differences can be established. The usefulness of the first is the extent of its universalizing scope, and of the second is its capacity to capture the nature of phenomena in their diversity.

Interpretivist theorizing is open to contestation when the underlying assumptions of the analysis are not sufficiently reflected upon. Issues arise, for instance, when an ideal-type universalizes specific historical experiences, or when it is misapplied to look for similarities rather than differences. Consider Max Weber's influential definition of the modern state as the political association that holds the monopoly of legitimate violence (in a given space). This can be reduced to a kind of standard or naturalized reference point against which other forms of polities are measured. Thus, the Eurocentric origins and understanding of Weber's ideal-type of the state might be tacitly applied to other parts of the world (for this critique, see Hobson 2012), generating typologies and attributing labels such as 'failed' or 'quasi' states (R. H. Jackson 1990) that are theoretically and politically problematic (for this critique, see Grovogui 1996). That concept-as-ideal-types are applied to contexts other than the one in which the concept was originally formed is normal, as we need some previous knowledge to acquire new knowledge. Yet, this practice can be contested by pointing to its dissonance with local conceptions of the state which bear no relation to the ideal-type. Phenomena like the state, or democracy, can be understood and lived in ways that are not captured by prominent definitions, as demonstrated in Lisa Wedeen's (2008) study of nation-building and democratic practices in Yemen. Such critique can show the limits and occasional violence of conceptual travels (Badie 1986, 1992) and may point to the need to rethink the ideal-type.

Interpretivist contestations also cannot escape the philosophical assumptions underlying the ideal-type. Weber's conceptualization of the state is not purely

derived from empirical analysis but inscribed in a realist tradition in political theory which defines politics through struggle and hence attributes a central place to physical violence and its management. Against this backdrop, it makes sense to see the state in the way Weber does. Weber's ideal-type is hence a heuristic device that is intrinsically connected to his political theory, from which it cannot be separated (for a more detailed discussion, see Guzzini 2017b). Critics have taken issue with this largely undiscussed philosophical origin of Weber's sociological concepts (Wolin 1981), including a Weberian realist like Aron (1967), who saw it as responsible for an exaggerated power-political view in world affairs.

De-naturalizing performatives in political practice

Concepts also play a central role in guiding and producing practical knowledge, providing ontological, normative, and heuristic-explanatory frames to orient the lifeworld of practitioners and the everyday. They order relations, inform strategic thinking, and guide political agendas and decision-making. As such, essential concepts are never neutral when deployed in political discourse and contest.

Significant in this regard is the interaction between concepts and social reality against the backdrop that language is not only representative of reality but also intervenes in it. The cognitive, affective and normative power of essential concepts is linked to their performativity: they *do* things. They have an impact on the world and those in it. Constructivists have long pointed out that the social world is built to a significant degree through the way our beliefs and concepts interact with that world. They can become self-fulfilling prophecies, where certain visions turn out to be real only because people have come to share a belief in them. And it happens when certain categorizations interact with the people to which they are applied, as in the Foucauldian analysis of the politics of normality co-constituting the sick, criminal, or sexually perverse – a phenomenon Ian Hacking (1999) called 'looping' or interaction effect (see also Foucault 1969, 46). In that sense, essential concepts help create the subject they presuppose or 'constitute the object of which they speak' (Bialasiewicz et al. 2007, 406).

Contestation here takes the form of de-naturalization and exposes the process through which such looping effects materialise. As Hacking (1999: 6) writes, constructivism is almost intrinsically about the idea that things could have been / become otherwise. If much of social reality is performative, then the processes in which social phenomena and identities are (conceptually) constituted is imbued with power politics (see also Guzzini 2017a). Contestation is hence a form of re-politicization, prominently exemplified in feminist interventions through the concept of gender (Butler 1999 [1990]). Within the scholarly context, exposing these naturalized processes shows how conceptualizations may hide and, hence, begs the (political) question how subjectivities and forms of domination are

constituted. It can become a form of *Ideologiekritik*. In the practical realm, contestation relates to attempts to control the meaning of key concepts in political discourses, and to efforts to challenge and expose performative processes. Where we find such practices depends on where we look and which voices we consider relevant.[7] Traditionally, IR scholars tend to study elite-level discourses within and among governments and in international institutions, but contestation also occurs at the level of the public and civil society, as ordinary agents may seek to redefine, disrupt or replace existing concepts.

The performance and contestation of essential concepts traverses academic and political domains and can be revealed in historical analysis of how ideational traditions structure practical thought and action. For instance, Jens Bartelson's (2018) conceptual history shows how a naturalized understanding of war as a productive force of history, based on the old idea of 'war as the father of all', became a self-fulfilling prophecy. As he writes, '[m]any of those things whose existence has been explained with reference to the productive force of war were later invoked to understand and legitimize the use of force, leading to a productive circularity in our understanding of what war possibly can mean' (Bartelson 2018, 24) and, when shared, do. He calls this circularity of the notion of war as a productive force 'ontogenetic war', or the warlike reality produced by such understanding of war, which his analysis contests by de-naturalizing its performative character.

Another approach is to look at concepts promoted to the policy world with performative intent. A prominent example is 'soft power', advanced by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004, 2007). When Nye proposed ranking international relations in terms of soft power, by which he meant the power of attraction, the concept was intended not merely as an analytical category but also as a practical one that, once shared by the main actors of international society, would change the way states act (Guzzini 2005, 2009). Stephanie Winkler (2020) empirically traced this dynamic and its mechanisms, showing how concept entrepreneurs and coalitions in the US, China and Japan promoted and fed into the soft power narrative, even if the concept eventually escaped their control (see also Winkler 2019). Contestation here can be observed in attempts by various governments to appropriate and implement the concept in their respective foreign policies, and in the (academic) critique of practitioners who treat soft power as if it were an object that can be picked up and used as a tool.

Struggles over the definition and use of a pertinent concept come to the fore especially if the performative stakes are high. The concept of terrorism, including

[7] For examples, see contributions in Berenskoetter (2016) and Ish-Shalom (2021a).

the category of the terrorist, has long been openly contested due to its political implications, in particular the stigmatization and (de)legitimation of violence it enables. Moves to fix the meaning by the US government and its allies following the attacks of September 11, 2001, stand alongside the ongoing inability to agree on a legal definition within the United Nations (Schmid 2004; Saul 2019). While policy-oriented academics have sought to solve the 'definitional problem' (Ganor 2002; see also Weinberg, Pedahzur, and Hirsch-Hoefler 2004), others critically expose the performance of terrorism discourses employed at the state level and show how the concept can be understood quite differently in the everyday (R. Jackson et al. 2011; Sjoberg and Gentry 2015; R. Jackson and Hall 2016).

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION: MEANINGFUL CONTESTATION VIA TRANSLATION

Concepts are the building blocks of knowledge. Some are central to our theories, meta-theories and political practice. When concepts raise central ontological and normative problematiques (What is security? How best to achieve justice?), and when they play a central role in both scholarly and practical discourse, they can be considered essential. Since we have multiple theoretical languages and practical knowledges, it comes as no surprise that essential concepts have more than one meaning.

Debating different readings of a concept is integral to open and productive academic debate about knowledge and its analytical, normative and political implications. If different conceptions of power direct attention to different locations where power resides and to different actors and structures capable of exercising power, we are reminded of the stakes of choosing one reading over another. Contesting a particular meaning not only serves as a critical check on the adequacy and usefulness of our favourite concepts, but can also have a creative effect by prompting a revision of an existing concept or the invention of a new one. It invites and enables theory building. Conceptual contestation is, thus, a vehicle for continuously re-writing the entries of an ever-unfinished encyclopaedia of knowledge (Leander 2017). It also exposes and challenges naturalizations that constrain how we think about ourselves and others, how we organize social relations and what world we consider possible. As such, contesting essential concepts is central to politics, understood as a process in which individuals and groups do not just dispute meanings but work to 'adjust, extend, resolve, accommodate, and transcend' their differences (Connolly 1993 [1974], 6).

Conceptual pluralism does not necessarily lead to meaningful debate and contestation, however. A concept may be used in such vague terms that it allows various parties to read their respective meanings into it, creating the illusion of there being agreement. In the political arena, the notion of 'international community' sometimes serves this rhetorical purpose (Mitrani 2021). In academia, the concept of 'identity' enabled loose appropriations without substantive conceptualization (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Scholars may also be wary of touching the most essential concepts in a disciplinary field out of concern that it may be destabilizing. In IR, the concept of anarchy (the absence of world government) had arguably acquired such a status, as it provided a baseline for much of mainstream theorizing and constituted the alleged demarcation criterion for IR as a distinct field of knowledge. And yet, precisely because of this constitutive function, the conceptual contestation of 'anarchy' proved relevant and feasible for both a theoretical critique, and a disciplinary reflection (see, e.g., Ashley 1988; Onuf and Klink 1989; Milner 1991; Wendt 1992). Even when a concept like anarchy loses its function as a central reference for wider debate, meaningful discussion continues, and other concepts, such as globalization or hierarchy, take its place.

Members of a theoretical family may also feel content to talk just among themselves. In these environments, pluralism not only leads to fragmentation but to a version of self-sufficiency, if not righteousness, in which references to essential contestedness and incommensurability are used as a protective shield from criticism and can end up legitimating 'business as usual at the price of a predefined pluralism' (Guzzini 1993, 446). In IR, this was arguably the case with the concept of power, of which realists and poststructuralists had very different conceptions but for the longest time saw no need to debate them. Hence, a necessary condition for meaningful contestation is for scholars to be conversant in different theoretical languages and willing to engage in dialogue (see, e.g., Sterling-Folker and Shinko 2005). Such conceptual encounters require 'ongoing conversations that seek to open [their] participants to the horizons of their respective others' (Michel 2021, 61), inviting alternative readings of a favoured concept and having one's own reading challenged.

If meaningful contestation requires genuine dialogue, it must be based on translation. Although insisting that paradigms have limited ontological contact, Thomas Kuhn already used the analogy with natural languages to think in terms of translations when theorizing the relations between paradigms (Kuhn 1970; for a discussion, see Guzzini 1998, 117 ff.). In a similar vein, rather than referencing Gallie's essay to insist on the incommensurability of different conceptual languages, it may be more fruitful to read it as a recognition of the importance, and the difficulty, of translation.

A substantive discussion of what the process of translating concepts entails is beyond the scope of this essay (for recent work on translation in IR, see Wigen 2018; Çapan, dos Reis, and Grasten 2021a; Heiskanen 2021). It suffices here to say that it is not a transfer, whereby a concept is transported from a source context A to a target context B. Moving a concept from one context to another is impossible, since there is always something lost in translation, and yet it is ubiquitous, as there is always something gained in translation. It is also not a unidirectional process of transmission from a sender to a receiver. Rather, translation that enables meaningful contestation serves as a shared interactive space in which knowledge is exchanged and produced. It is an understanding of translation as 'an interstitial communicative process and exchange' (Çapan, dos Reis, and Grasten 2021b, 2–3) during which conceptual meaning is reconstructed or even transformed. In this understanding, the universal is not the precondition of a translation but an emergent property of the encounter of people using concepts and languages, which do not stay unchanged through the meeting (for this argument, see Diagne 2022).

Such an interactive, communicative and creative process is not based on the technical application of some generic translation mechanisms or rules. Rather, translation 'confronts us with the reflexive challenge of situating knowledge production in a multiplicity of social contexts from which a multiplicity of world-making references become possible' (Herborth 2021, 35). It requires mastering two (or more) languages and the ability to move in-between them. It asks for accepting the reasonableness of other conceptualizations and their 'permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question' (Gallie 1956, 193). It requires willingness to learn the complex configuration of cluster concepts, their embeddedness in theory, their links to normative commitments, their explanatory appeal and their political salience. This is an exercise in humility, the ability to engage and to reflect on the implications of different meanings of contested essential concepts. This is not easy. But it is vital for improving communication, for theory building, and for clarity about which reading of an essential concept we prefer based on its theoretical coherence, analytical payoffs, and what society we want to live in.

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