

## Apple-pear and conceptual stretching

*"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."*

— Marcel Proust, 1871-1922

Our attempts at talking sensibly about *political consumption* have lead us through a motley of academic and semantic woe. We have tried to find ways to clarify this concept, but in trying, we inadvertently and inescapably created only a new and more sophisticated academic potpourri of conceptual jumble. Near the denouement of the course, the eager young minds in class had turned into Doubting Thomases that question the very nature of the concept of *concept*; its ability to *stretch* and *travel*<sup>1</sup> either paralyzes us or smudges it into omnipresence. Proof of this was displayed in the final discussion session, December 8th: the—few active though representative—discussants exhibited obvious trouble to maintain a straight interpretation of the concepts of *action* and *influence* (noun and verb!).<sup>2</sup>

In this seeking in, what Proust calls, *new landscapes*, we misguide ourselves towards increased knowledge. We are in fact not pursuing a noble cause, or superior telos. Au contraire: we increase difficulty in defining the very ground we stand on by formulating ways of interpretation. This postmodernist legacy (the denial of an epistemological rock-bottom) doesn't clarify an iota of what political consumption is all about. It only adds to confusion in scattering and fragmentation of multilayered scientific disarray. Instead, let us try and look at political consumption not as a new conceptual landscape, but let us adapt a different view. We must shed that ambiguous postmodern skin that only manufactures academic dissent, but we mustn't step into the trepid trap of modernity either. Let it be clear that I'm not in favor of the modernist take: I, too, am disgusted by the supposition of 'something' that embodies the nucleus of noesis. In fact, I'm disgusted by any supposition concerning epistemological gain. However, I'm afraid that's hardly tenable in any fashion of cognitive activity, but that's another bottomless tarpit of despondency I rather refrain from plunging into at this moment. Still, suppositions should be reduced to the minimum amount. This includes the ambiguity created by the overabundance of concepts and, moreover, their interpretation.

Since a rigid and universal interpretation of any concept (abstractions like *politics* in particular) seems an impossibility, the arbitrary composition of taxonomical schemata must be abandoned for the sake of fruitful and conceivable scientific grounding. An

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," in: *The American Political Science Review* (64:4) p. 1034.

<sup>2</sup> Following the definition of *political participation* provided by Brady (1999): "Action by ordinary citizens directed towards influencing some political outcomes."

alternative to this could be found in (post)modern information technology. The organizational structure of information and knowledge as it is imagined by adherents of the philosophy of *Web 2.0* offers a serious alternative that could rule out contemporary festering conceptual ambiguity: tag clouds.<sup>3</sup> (Of course, such a thorough revision of the scientific method is as utopian as the intended effort at (continuous) clarification of terms and their offspring, but upholding obsolescent paradigms only amplifies the forthcoming rude awakening.) Tag clouds are not regarded as a formal classification system (due to our modern scientific paradigm), but could prove very effective in structuring our reality. Much like observation has lead preceding scientists—Linneaus in particular—to the composition of hierarchical taxonomies of species, this same observation and evaluation of instances of empirical data in the ontological structure of reality applies to the act of tagging by (post-)modern participants in the *maelstrom* of contemporary *memes*.<sup>4</sup> Modern society is an overfed horizontal gathering of empirical data, available to a large part of the world population. The democratization of information has turned ‘reality’ into a topic of subjective inquiry, allowing a multitude of instances of empirical data to suffer from conceptual exhaustion. Since this movement is a typical trait of our time, we must move our focus from the untenable taxonomical structuring of the here and now to the shifting of paradigm (as Thomas Kuhn put it) that is at hand. That paradigm is the one of democracy (I will not try and define that concept through its own method for clarity’s sake), and it allows the people to structure the people’s reality.

To illustrate this, think of an apple. One has easily created a mental image of an apple. But what does this image consist of? What does it encompass? I don’t think anyone will object if I say that this image is composed of a shape and a color. The trouble begins at defining these Wittgensteinian *objects*.<sup>5</sup> How to describe the shape of an apple? One can say it is round, but the stricter approach would point out that that is a flawed assumption, since there are flaws in every apple’s roundness (I am aware of my own supposition here). Secondly, there’s the color. What colors are apples? They can be green, yellow and red, and, if rotten, brown or a lot of other different colors. So the very definition of the *objects* composing the *state of affairs* that is an apple can not be successful, unless more than one definition of the objects is allowed. But that would imply a sliding scale of relative and gradual values. An apple can thus be described as lumpy and yellow, a description that

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Anderson, “What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for Education,” [www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/techwatch/tsw0701b.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Here I should give a definition of this term coined by Richard Dawkins in his *The Selfish Gene* (1976), but it appears that the very trouble with concepts arises here before me. As Francis Beer kicks off in her short article “Memetic Meanings” (*Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* (1999, 3) p1-4.): “The definition of a meme, ‘begins, ‘is currently ambiguous.... Without some kind of firm definition the word ‘meme’ becomes almost meaningless.” Let it be wrapped up as a meme being “a unit of cultural transmission.”

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (1922). Proposition 2.01: “A state of affairs (a state of things) is a combination of objects (things).” <http://filepedia.org/files/Ludwig%20Wittgenstein%20-%20Tractatus%20Logico-Philosophicus.pdf>

applies to the mental image of a lemon as well. Description of an apple, and with that its taxonomical classification, is flawed as a result of our very own flawed perception. We can only compose contemporary schemes to fit our contemporary input-data. As soon as something out of the ordinary appears—as our induction proves to be faulty as new data is gathered—we are helpless castaways in the sea of naivité Sartori referred to.<sup>6</sup>

Then there is the subjective interpretation that might clarify things, like the taste of an apple. This, however, requires a personal—subjective—judgement known as a *quale* (I'm aware of the fact that color also requires this, as “redness” is a *quale* if there ever was one, but I should try and keep this text somewhat accessible). Hence, the scientific value of subjective definition of mental images does not add to the classical paradigm of conceptual structure of today. Classifying apples in the old-fashioned way is a tough job and can only be done in a relative scheme, as compared with other instances of empirical data, or *states of affairs*, like lemons, eggs, tables or clouds. We know what an apple is because we know what it is not. We can only define one by opposing it to the other. This is not based on *qualia* alone, since it doesn't necessarily interpret features in terms of “redness” or “roundness,” but it does make a difference between “redness” and “blueness,” regardless of the terms used. The *general idea* stays in sync with the popular conception of apple.<sup>7</sup>

Scientific deepening of the *state of affairs* we call apple, attempts at fathoming the objects and grounding the apple in firm, absolute scientific soil, merely obfuscates the notion of apple as it is observed by the people. Forcing apple into taxonomical hierarchy to please the human quest for sense and structure in reality reduces apple to a relative component of the system of empirical data that is in fragile balance, since it is based on human perception alone. Assuming apple is just its scientific definition in this hierarchy of sub-concepts proves a problem as soon as the nashipear enters the equation: it has all empirical features of an apple, but it's not. I'm not saying we should improve the paradigm we're upholding now. Instead, we should allow scientific knowledge to come down from its pedestal and merge with the democracy of information, to become incorporated into empirical reality again and prevent it from getting lost in the structuring of structure.

Democratization of knowledge should contribute to a more apprehensible quasi-definition of concepts, putting the apple back in an all encompassing tag cloud called reality. Reality is hypertext: flat, referential and interactive. Our current paradigm has us waver between postmodern subjectivism and modern structuralism. That is why political participation is impossible to define. As Sartori puts it, the world is over-politicizing, as

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<sup>6</sup> Extraordinary things do happen, and more often than the layman thinks.

<http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info:doi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.0050194>

<sup>7</sup> Borrowing John Locke's term *avant le lettre* for what we now call concept, supported on Plato's Ideal philosophy.

globalization and individualization expand the political sphere to inconceivable size. (And consuming is what we do as atomized societies.) Thus, we have to study everything “potentially political” (and consumptive) to try and practice political science, shifting the focus to the periphery and the input-side (meaning loss of focus). This omnipresence of politics in—not only—science ultimately leads to the disappearance of politics: its fading into obscurity.<sup>8</sup>

So what is politics then, if we try to contract the political sphere back to its core? The concept of politics is obsolete: there is nothing that could define anything as non-political, unless intention and motivation are measured aswell. Unfortunately, that is far from attainable in our current scientific spectrum. It would reduce every unit of research into a tag cloud of its own, obfuscating scientific view on ontology. That’s way science needs the proverbial set of new eyes, not new scenery. Terms should be rejected in favor of common sense (a dirty word that defies definition, and that’s why it’s so very appropriate for the new science!). We can go around Hume’s problem of induction by rejecting the Wittgensteinian notion of logical space and facts. Why hold on to this view on reality and truth if the author himself abandoned it in favor of an intuitionistic approach: the very new paradigm I take a stand for. Let reality be as ill-defined as it deserves to be, without having us, meager human species with limited cognitive capacity, trying to force it into synthetic human structures. Let reality impose its autopoietic structure upon us, and let us cease our feeble quest for knowledge. We are failing anyway, only obfuscating our own modern theoretical foundations with postmodern tools.

Concepts are leaking into vast spaces of indeterminacy and ambiguity, being both nowhere and everywhere, undermining their own existence. They change continuously (stretching and travelling), from being defined as abstractions of empirical data to being applied to that very same empirical reality, thereby allowing science to manipulate (paralyze and obfuscate) its own results. Rigid separation and definition of concepts is inherently counternatural and forces science in an passive *status quo*. Drawing a line to separate action from intention can only be done arbitrarily and requires consensus. Is that science? Intersubjective verification and agreement? How can anything sensible be said about concepts if their meaning is to be defined by those discussing it? It doesn’t broaden scientific knowledge but contaminates it with selective subjectivity. If we want to go the subjective way, then go the full nine yards and don’t try and seek a compromise between the two. This is what smudges concepts. Our individualism tears the threads of absolutist modern epistemological rock-bottom. Eventually, our scientific patriarchs, *uomini universale* as Leonardo da Vinci and Michealangelo Buonarotti, have created the conditions

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” in: *The American Political Science Review* (64:4) p. 1034.

to allow popular subjectivism back into the scientific scheme. But their knowledge doesn't apply to our world anymore. We simply can not "stand on the shoulders of giants" because at our altitude, we need other means of analysis of empirical data. We are being misguided by these giants' insights, because they are defect or flawed. Concepts, the general ideas, change continuously, thereby making it more and more difficult for us to correctly describe and explain the world around us (a critical task of science). Since regressing to absolutist times is firmly disabled by self-oriented improvement, the only way is up, embracing subjectivism and turning it into the new paradigm, creating unity out of scattering. This way, we set scientific dialectics in motion, setting sail to *terra incognita*.

There is no way of escaping the concept of political consumption in an era that is dominated by both. The only thing shakeable is the concept itself. Since the concept seems to cover everyone participating in modern society, that is the thing we should reject.

How does this connect to political participation? In my view, both concepts have leaked into vast spaces of hard to define conceptual ambiguity. To set the perimeter somewhere and to define a certain space as belonging to a certain concept undermines the wider array of research. Research limited to predefined concepts doesn't contribute to broader, multi- or interdisciplinary knowledge. The fragmentization and scattering of science that—ironically—has been set off by the *uomini universale*, has led to profound deepening but also staggering narrowing of scientific disciplines. The ambiguity of concepts and their arbitrary meanings have lead us to this point of realization of disintegration of science. Scientists inhabit their own islands that are slowly drifting away from one another, and that is partly due to conceptualization. We simply can not "stand on the shoulders of giants" because at our altitude, we need other means of analysis of empirical data. We are being misguided by these giants' insights, because they are defect or flawed. Concepts, the general ideas, change continuously, thereby making it more and more difficult for us to correctly describe and explain the world around us (a critical task of science).

Ergo, what is political and what is consumption? To define is to narrow down, we might include junk or exclude relevant instances. So are we to accept the limited use of

these concepts or should we redefine the conceptual landscape into more fluid terms that can move through paradigm shifts?

There is no way of escaping the concept of political consumption in an era that is dominated by both. The only thing shakeable is the concept itself. Since the concept seems to cover everyone participating in modern society, that is the thing we should reject. So what is political participation? It is our existence in the here and now, proof of the fallibility of the concept. We consume space, so we take part in the political sphere. There's hardly any opportunity to escape the here and now. Globalization and infrastructural eutrophication have tied us all together in one concept: political civilians. Whenever we move, we consume. How and why we motivate that is irrelevant: our actions are ambiguous and layered, until the very subconscious core. We better separate the concepts political activism and aware consumption, but these concepts are hard to measure, since it demands individual input and feedback on motivations. Products that support political consumption (either directly or indirectly, through boycott or buycott) are too widely available. Simply reciting statistics doesn't suffice in motivating the concept of political consumption.

Integration of literature:

Sartori – provides an answer to the question of conceptual stretching and tries to solve the problem by proposing the ladder of abstraction (intension/extension).

Collier & Mahon – critique of Sartori, try and give better solutions (could this also be regarded as postmodern versus modern theorizing?) Touches on empirical research (could that touch on my take on concepts and empirical reality?)

In stead of taxonomic classification and efforts to try and build a massive building to store everything in, let the empirical reality be its own building and label the data in it. Modern operating systems work with this kind of structure to fetch and stash data. Apply a label to it, and it can be found. A more specific labelling does not require a more definite concept, but just more labels, or tags. An apple could be tagged fruit, round, hard, green and red and yellow. The multiple colors don't have to exclude one another from the description. Apples are all over the color spectrum, like paprika's. To define them down to a specific color is to not do the concept of paprika justice. So, how define political consumption in a tagging system? It's either active or passive (boycott/buycott), by buying stuff or just by inhabiting space. Come to think of it, there are more tags left out than put in. So we should instead define the restspace left by the definition of the concept political consumption, but that implies that we know the restspace, and that means that we know

what all space is. We cannot tell the different from the same if we do not know what this field of differences encompasses (Wittgenstein?).

I propose a mixing of quantitative and qualitative research, a keyword-tagging system like a tagcloud. Empirical data should be tagged in a similar way. Apple should have a big tag fruit, and smaller tags red, green and yellow. There might even be negative tags, like non-fruit for banana and tomato, as an adaption to common misunderstanding. (often made mistakes (negatives) are thereby incorporated in the positive query).

Categories are too rigid, instead, we should do the empirical reality justice by letting her be her own category and just add tags to the phenomena we perceive. Consumption can be political or non-political (dependent on motivation) and politics can be either consumptive or not, but the two do not exclude each other. Taxonomies tend to do that. The concepts themselves are in my system supported by more concepts. An apple is thus a metaconcept composed of subconcepts (red, green, round, hard, fruit). This makes it more suitable for comparative study, because the concept doesn't have to travel. For instance, the concept bird sort of implies the concept of able to fly, but kiwibirds, ostriches and chickens do not, so the concept is not stretched, but filled with extra info. The empirical data perceived and found in empirical unities, or Wittgensteinian Sachverhalten (composed by sub-concepts: objects: color and shape, not thinkable in separate form but still elementary part of reality). So to define, or in an ugly word taxonomize, an apple, is to add all its features to the apple-tagcloud. That is the concept apple and it can grow. It doesn't describe anything else than a universal apple, one that does not necessarily manifest itself in one instance, but in all instances at the same time. Every possible recognizable feature of apple is included in this tagcloud. This could be stashed in a computer. If the computer could perceive the ontology, then it could classify reality, name everything, much more effective than us, people.

Now for political consumption, how to tag this phenomenon? (concerning logical space, I could state that to know what makes this a concept is to know how it is its opposite.) I confess that the tagging of abstractions like politics and consumption is rather difficult. I think a limit should be set to end concepts, to prevent them from overflowing into something completely different. But then I would be arbitrarily interfering with concepts and creating a taxonomy. Instead, the concept of apple should only be understood through the complete tagcloud, and not just some of the features, or Wittgensteinian objects. Maybe an ever more literal visualization of concepts should be offered: apple as a collection of objects concerning the shape and color. Other than objects, nothing should be included. A sub-concept like 'fruit' would only make it more difficult. Should there then be a one-way-policy in tagging concepts? So that apple is only part of the

concept of fruit, and not the other way around? What about reverse engineering? Subspecies of apple, how to classify those?

This is definitely a problem.

The problem with the apple is that the 'general idea', as Locke put it, has a potentially infinite amount of ontological instances. This in contrast to the more suitable example of geometrical shapes, like the triangle. A triangle actually does not ontologically exist. The concept of the triangle is derived from mathematical 'truths': a twodimensional shape with 3 corners is per definition a triangle. There is no definition for apple, since it's not a construct of human thought. True, triangles do appear in empirical data, but the Platonic Idea of the triangle is an abstraction that is perfectly describable by laws, like I just formulated: a twodimensional shape with 3 corners. There are subspecies of triangles—equilateral, isosceles and scalene—but these are hardly comparable to apples. Apples are not classifiable in these categories because no two apples are the same. The same could go for the human species (maybe a more illustrative example): all people on earth belong to the same species, but there are lots of differences in color, shape and size. Still, an Inuit is as much human as an Aboriginal, although they are completely different as well. Even on a smaller scale, one Inuit is not the same as the other, and the same goes for the Aboriginal. They might look alike, because they belong to the same race, but they might not belong to the same family. A similar taxonomy (or genealogy in human terms) is imposed on other ontological instances like apples. For both species, there are similar problems. For instance: where does a human end and an ape begin? There is a debate going on the taxonomical status of gorillas and chimpanzees, but this is as much a conceptual discussion as the one on political consumption/participation. This might illustrate the 'sea of naivete' that Sartori points out in his essay. Maybe we just have to come to terms with the fact that we cannot classify everything adequately. There is no way of prescribing what an apple is if we have insufficient input-data, and not having all the data is per definition insufficient. All conclusion can thus only be based on induction, and that's where Hume's problem of induction kicks in. We can only base our inductions on flawed or incomplete info. And this goes for everything material and tangible, imagine how difficult it is to define concepts like 'political' and 'participation' in this, if the individual, on a global stage, can do his bidding in any way he pleases, in any abstract fashion, without leaving tangible or empirical data for researchers to test their concepts with.

Taken into consideration our limited knowledge of the ontology, we can not escape the notion of induction (our taxonomies are based on perception), thus if induction proves to be flawed and our taxonomies (or paradigms) do not work anymore. So, if the ontology keeps messing with our system, we can only conclude our system is flawed. We can not keep expanding the system, though. We are either forced to classify a species under

another class or import a new class for the species alone. Debate exists about this topic (<http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info:doi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.0050194>) And suppose we encounter alien lifeforms (not the fantastic little green men, but singlecelled organisms or maybe something completely beyond our scope), then we have to come up with new solutions. Enfin, in the end it proves that our concepts of classes and our taxonomies are flawed or incomplete. But we need a system to classify our world, so I guess this is the 'lesser evil'. Another illustration that there is no 'good'. Only things that approach a certain truth (or maybe only the truth we agree on, not necessarily the Truth).

The nashipear is a pear, but it looks like an apple. How do we define pear and how do we define apple? Children are being taught that an apple is, more or less, round, and a pear has a bulge on the top. Only after further biological (and sense-data) research, the nashipear turns out to be not an apple, since it looks like one. The Platonic Idealist taxonomical structure upheld by scientists nowadays should leave room for interjection of species. Platonic structure comes from empirical input, and the input then dictates the structuring of new knowledge and data. So, all the apples sofar have looked round and red, but there's also apples that are not round or red. And what about names? Is a pineapple an apple? And a pomegranate? And an orange? Names confuse, and not everyone knows their biological class, but isn't that just another dictatorial structure that leaves no room for new stuff, unless it's really really weird, like alien stuff?