
COCTA News

The former chairman of COCTA, Prof. Giovanni SARTORI, has recently published a major work in social science theory which has important implications for conceptual and terminological questions, methodological and substantial ones. His two volumes on *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* (Chatham House) are eminently worth reading for all those interested in basic social science problems relating to the word "democracy" and the interpretation of concepts of democracy in the classical authors (Part two) as well as in the contemporary debate (Part one). Let me quote from Sartori's Foreword:

"To begin with, a pervasive change has occurred in the vocabulary of politics. To an unprecedented extent, authors have come to conceive their concepts at whim. This development has been legitimized by the brave new thought that words have arbitrary meanings. If so, we are all entitled to a new freedom, to stipulate freely what words mean. This brave new thought obviously had no impact whatsoever on the hard sciences, but eventually obtained devastating effects in the soft areas of knowledge, particularly in the vocabulary of political theory. Here new theories can be made just out of verbal manipulations. And it is in fact the case that freedom, authority, repression, violence, coercion, tolerance, and many other key terms no longer address - for a sizable public - the problems that the theory of politics has long addressed. Are we still able to communicate intelligibly? Can we still transmit and accumulate knowledge? I would certainly hope so - but not if nothing is done about it.

Another, not unrelated change bears on the influence of Marxism. Until the 1950s the bulk of the literature was on "democracy", not on "capitalist democracy". Today Marxists and non-Marxists alike speak of capitalist democracy as a matter of course. The shift is nonetheless a momentous one. Capitalist democracy is a politico-economic system and indeed, for Marxists, an economic system projected onto a political superstructure. Whether democracy *tout court* - as a political system - still receives a fair and adequate hearing under the capitalist democracy focus (I personally doubt it), its acceptance does carry crucial built-in assumptions. The same applies to another Marxist-induced change, that is, the current commonplace acceptance of "democratic ideology" as a designator not only of the value beliefs of democracy but also of its theory. To be sure, non-Marxists employ the word ideology in a neutral, innocent sense. Even so, to concede that "all is ideology" is by no means an innocuous concession of little consequence.

A third change stands on a different plane. When the "gospel of negation" swept across the institutions of learning in the mid-1960s, the behavioral revolution had won its own revolution, and thus the theory of democracy was largely becoming empirical. This was and is a much needed addition. But the timing was unfortunate, for the empirical theory of democracy was no match for the philosophical, high-flown theorizing of the Frankfurt school and its widespread progeny. This is simply to note that the empirical theory is not, and is not supposed to be, the argumentative theory. It so happened, therefore, that the more democracy became argued -

scrutinized, debated, contested - the less the empirical theory of democracy had to say. The decade was carried, not by the behavioral, but by the campus revolution. We have thus been largely left with a theory of democracy - the argumentative one - constructed with much passion but little knowing.

As we muddle through the 1980s the question is: Does a mainstream theory of democracy still exist? I think not. Its dismemberment results, somewhat paradoxically, from the joint impact of a decade of negation and a subsequent decade of technicalization. The simplistic, engaged, and enraged literature of the mid-1960s has been followed by a sophisticated literature rich in bravura. The bulk of this literature purely and simply ignores the negators of the 1960s; it equally ignores, however, whatever preceded their negations. It starts anew from a tabula rasa. The prisoner's dilemma, the paradox of voting, maximum justice, the logic of collective action, the theory of public goods - all this (and more) attest to a new, exciting creativity. The same applies to the revival of political philosophy. Rawls's original position under a veil of ignorance, Nozick's state of nature, Ackerman's neutrality assumption - these and other "thought experiments" doubtlessly are innovative breakthroughs. The point remains that this new literature does not add up to a full-fledged theory of democracy. If debunking left the theory of democracy in shambles, its recent enrichment is largely single-issue-minded and leaves us with splendid fragments in splendid isolation. But if the theory of democracy no longer obtains a mainstream, it is imperative, I believe, to seek its rebuilding.

The division of this work into two parts each of which is self-contained should not be construed as a hard-and-fast separation. As is obvious, historical learning also enters volume I, and fact-value tensions are addressed in volume 2 - but with different emphases. And there is no difference between the two volumes as regards their argumentative load, so to speak. From beginning to end, the work is strongly argumentative. Intellectual housecleaning does not come easy and cheap. It bears reiteration that I take a theorizing about democracy to consist, first and above all, of correct arguments correctly connected. If a premise does not sustain a consequence, if logical fallacies are involved, if our basic concepts are obscure or ambiguous, then it is certain that we have a bad theory. I also take it that, of all political systems, democracy is the one that most crucially hinges on clearheadedness. If so, the theory of democracy is also the unraveling of the messy web of arguments that bear on what democracy ought to be, can be, is not and should not become - lest intended goods evolve into unintended evils."

Giovanni Sartori, Columbia University

The Sartori volume: *The Theory of Democracy Revisited* is an excellent exercise in the type of conceptual analysis that COCTA wishes to promote in its activities at various social science conferences. There is a clear and succinct statement of the fundamentals of this type of conceptual analysis in the volume *Social Science Concepts* (Sage: 1984) by Sartori himself in his introductory chapter in the book. Sartori states the case for achieving conceptual clarity even when one talks about such a value relevant phenomenon as democracy.

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