

# The Increasing Precariousness of Political Concepts

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## 1. Introduction: From monolithic gravitas to morphological fluidity

When I first started studying political theory, well over 50 years ago, we were led to believe in the solidity of its core concepts—justice, liberty, rights, democracy, and the rest of that acclaimed procession. Many of those concepts were cherished, but there were also ‘unsavoury’ ones—totalitarianism, some forms of nationalism, and even—quite mistakenly, I regret to say—ideology, at the time predominantly viewed in Europe through the lenses of its Marxist interpretation. There were also other concepts that could swing either way—power is the most obvious one, fluctuating between an oppressively constraining and an enabling and energizing connotation. But I do not wish to focus on ‘nice’ and ‘nasty’ concepts, on what some people term values and disvalues. That is for ethicists to consider, not for political theorists/scientists *stricto sensu*, whose task is to understand, not to advocate. Concepts were historically thought of as monolithic and whole entities, uniform and authoritative, systematically dominating and carving up the sphere of political knowledge and thought. True, they underwent temporal, and even temperamental, change, but they changed as *wholes*—think of the myriad histories of *the* idea of democracy from ancient times to the present (Roper 2012), or—to the contrary—the appeal to the perennial and universal nature of liberty (Podoksik 2010). Even disputes over the relatively recent distinction between positive and negative liberty were couched in terms that strongly favoured the latter over the former (Berlin 1969). Political concepts had weight, they had rhetorical force, and they were inscribed on a select and broadly recognizable register.

The flux over time that potentially typified concepts was held in check by a robust collective memory controlled by a variety of factors: cultural elites, linguistic and philosophical purists, vernacular conventions, or national dictionaries laying claim to authoritativeness, frequently closing the stable door well after the horse had bolted. Above all, concepts were assumed to be cut from the same cloth, parcelling out the socio-political terrain, each concept possessing the status of a triple portal into the worlds of collective

action, public justification, and scholarly debate. To a degree these features of political concepts still apply, not least because the teaching syllabi of universities and similar seats of learning are cautious, perhaps uninventive, in the ways they disseminate understandings of the political, as distinct from the more complex arguments and methods individual scholars employ when advancing their innovative research findings. Communication is inevitably dependent on simplification, not complexity, especially as political concepts are designed for broad social consumption in everyday language alongside learned inquiry. But the sidestepping of complexity comes at a price. Concepts still are the building blocks of political theory, but not – in recent academic usage – in the manner held in the past.

That recent usage heralds the advent of the second stage. While the substantive contents of political concepts have always elicited contention alongside support, their professional study did so while remaining silent about, or oblivious to, the micro-structural elements that constituted them. Marx's lack of interest in the details of ideological debate—focusing predominantly on the elimination of the phenomenon, and with it the concept itself—obscured the subcutaneous ferment 'inside' concepts that was capable of convulsing them at the drop of a hat, propelling them forwards or backwards, fragmenting them, or endowing them with an astonishing and multivariant creativity. Our awareness of the minutiae of a concept's components, shifting, detaching and recombining like amoebae viewed under a microscope, revealed a totally different conceptual landscape, both fragile and full of promise. Political concepts, it transpired, have always been precarious, but that characteristic has been obscured by once dominant methods and approaches and, indeed, by commonplace language, imposing on them an artificial order, or a specious constancy.

## *2. Four features of political concepts*

I will briefly note the characteristics of that revealed precariousness before considering a more striking variant. Much of that second-stage landscape had to do with four realizations that took root among political theorists and with which we are all by now increasingly familiar. First, political concepts are not only units of ideas—that is to say, specific elements of thought. They are also units of language, usually signified by words. As units of language, they ipso facto adopt some of its characteristics: in particular, semantic ambiguity and indeterminacy as the baseline to which one can

either be reconciled, or which one seeks to resist. Second, political concepts work better *politically* not as approximations of ideals and desiderata, but as exercises in interpretation and *Verstehen* in the Weberian sense. This means that they are always contingent on the invariably shifting understandings and decodings of their prospective consumers. Third, political concepts do not exist in a monadic vacuum but are ontologically interwoven with other political concepts, cutting across and through them, calling into question their very boundaries, their 'territorial' and spatial integrity. For example, the concept of democracy already intersects with some of the features of equality, of liberty as self-determination and collective sovereignty, and of community—inasmuch as democracy is a group attribute. Fourth, political concepts are contextual products that reflect the real-world circumstances under which they are produced, reproduced and discarded. They are embedded in, and extricated from, the living world, no matter how many protests emerge from the aficionados of ideal-types and other-worldly abstraction.

These four features are analytically distinct issues that combine to direct an unremitting dynamic that affects the growth, and occasionally shrinkage, of our sub-discipline. Their chief consequence was that precariousness could no longer be seen as a defect—if indeed that ever was the case—but as the normal condition of political concepts, be that ever so disheartening to some genres of analytic philosophy or radical critical theory. I have always felt envious of those of my Oxford philosophy colleagues who had the great fortune to be born with the conviction of certainty—an attribute from which I was regrettably excluded when human capabilities were providentially handed out.

At the time—beginning half a century ago—John Rawls' concept of justice appeared to offer one appropriate reduction in scale of justice's macro-pretensions. His collocation 'justice as fairness' emerged, not quite consciously on his part—and not dressed up as such—as a tug of war between impersonal systemic demands and personal claims. It is no accident that the word 'fair' has almost no equivalent in other languages and is either collapsed into 'just' or circumvented by substitutes: 'equitable', 'giusto', 'imparziale', 'gerecht', or simply the borrowed colloquialism 'das ist nicht fair'. When a child misses out on being selected for a football team because the bus has broken down en route, she or he doesn't say 'that isn't just' but 'that isn't fair'. So Rawls' gambit was in one sense a masterstroke, identifying the difference between a bombastic systemic property—justice—and an appeal to the individual sense of non-discrimin-

ation or bad luck. It inadvertently unhooked justice from its apparently unassailable top-ranking and imperious position and reduced it to a human scale, seemingly at the cost of introducing a subjective evaluation. As the members of a society filed in a queue to pass behind the veil of ignorance from which justice could be articulated, two perspectives complemented each other: individuation—'ask *anyone*' (because each person was entitled to a hearing), and inclusivity—'ask *everyone*' (as, one presumes, the entire society was standing in line to discard the accumulated knowledge it had acquired). The grandeur, even pomposity, of justice was counterbalanced by detaching it—precariously?—from the authority of tried and tested legal and philosophical 'learning'.

But this is not what actually happened in that thought experiment. Rawls' stratagem, rather, was to resurrect a misleading and wholly artificial conceptual determinacy and attach it to fairness, by assuming that everyone under the veil of ignorance would emerge with identical, unchanging principles. As moral entities, their dispositions would simply be shared under the aegis of a 'reasonable pluralism', exhibiting 'the capacity for social cooperation as fundamental', and excluding mad or aggressive doctrines (Rawls 1996: 144, 370). That obviated the need for laying the foundational ground rules through democratic or participatory means, because any single person—upon donning the magical veil of ignorance and emerging with fairness inscribed on their hearts—would be a reliable representative of the entire reasonable body. Adding them up through the quantitative measures of counting heads that democracies regularly adopt was therefore redundant. Argumentational fixity—the scourge of modern conceptual analysis—was merely transferred from an institutional attribute from above—justice—to a personalized procedure from below. That return by the back door of abstract depersonalized universalism neatly ruled out indeterminacy and ostensibly protected the integrity of moral language against the Wittgensteinians and the semantic pluralists.

When Rawls went on to associate that procedure with a 'political liberalism', he devalued the fullness of 'the political' because—running against the grain of the liberalisms that invariably characterize the world of politics—the political features of negotiation, disagreement, and factionalism were forestalled. Those features are always integral to liberalism's *raison d'être*, as they are to all bodies of political thinking. To remove them from politics is a form of intellectual neutering. Rather than augmenting the robustness of the political as claimed by Rawlsian philosophy it achieves the very oppos-

ite: a flawed and curtailed—arguably undesirable—version of politics. The concept is rendered precarious, failing to match its concrete manifestations.

### 3. Key and core political concepts

So from here to the currently unfolding third stage, which concerns what makes a concept both key and political. For the phrase ‘key political concept’ that rolls off our tongues has become doubly problematic. First, what does that key unlock? Perennial status? Not invariably if we move out of our culture zones. Superior status? That ‘top of the pops’ perspective is open to constant re-ordering. The rate of recurrence? The word-tracing employed in corpus linguistics as a measure of frequency is no automatic guarantor of significance or longevity—consider the recent overwhelming inundation of political language by the term ‘populism’. The ideational competition over pole position always takes place under the shadow of fragility, involving contests that demolish the abstract equality of standing granted to key concepts (Reinhart Koselleck’s *Grundbegriffe*) and key political concepts. The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*’s method of alphabetizing them merely screens them from the inescapable perils of ranking and qualitative differentiation. If all *Grundbegriffe* are equally ‘key’ by an act of lexical acclamation that merits inclusion in a dictionary, some are notwithstanding more key than others.

It is therefore important to distinguish key political concepts from core political concepts. The former are foundational and widely applicable within a political culture, though even then not necessarily ubiquitous; the latter are ideationally ‘localized’ patterns or clusters *within* a tangible, working ideology and, while indispensable to that ideology as it stands, may or may not claim general foundational status. Core concepts are the necessary linchpins within the morphology of any particular ideology, serving as the anchors around which adjacent and peripheral concepts move. Their necessity is thus structural rather than endemic to an ideational vocabulary or discourse in a given society (or given societies) (Freeden 1996: 13-136). The relationship between key and core political concepts is that of an overlapping Venn diagram, in which some members of either grouping will have no contact with the other.

One crucial addition to the Koselleckian perspective is to see political concepts not as isolated ideas but as continuously interacting networks, so that no concept can be intelligibly divorced from the ephemeral framing

conceptual environment in which it is currently embedded. Political concepts display perpetually fluctuating weight in relation to one another. They are prioritized, doctored, stretched and—not least—relativized in colloquial language, not just historically but at any moment in time. They always contain traces of other concepts; indeed, sometimes in considerable portions. Concepts are also subject to interpretative overload or what Paul Ricoeur felicitously called the surplus of meaning (Ricoeur 1976), except that such a surplus is no longer regarded as a flaw but as an existential fact, even an asset contributing to ideational variety and diversity. It predominantly reflects a shift in emphasis from the systemic production of political ideas (Skinner 1988)—believed in the past to be an elitist activity—to their consumption, seemingly associated with democratic and pluralist practices.

Yet perhaps we do not even need a key to an inner sanctum and can leave the door open to the vicissitudes of time and place, to those who are spontaneous enunciators alongside those who are accomplished refiners. Currently, political theorists vacillate between constructing and corraling concepts for explanatory and investigatory purposes—offering intellectualized abstractions—or wading into ordinary political language, so that if we do generalize, we do so through utilizing and reflecting the multiple discourses circulating among members of a polity. If political concepts are charged with the obvious task of working *politically*, it means that they are designed to make things happen, or prevent other things from happening—that is, they exercise persuasive and organizing power in varying intensities within groups, large and small. Thus, thinking about democracy as a practice—for good or evil—and as a lived-through, immediate experience engages that concept in a completely different sense from Koselleck's 'democratization' (Koselleck 1972: xii-xxvii)—a social process viewed from a distance and visible to few: a second order categorization of a practice that is not notably part of a vernacular vocabulary. It is a scientific analytical concept, not a political one.

The difficulty is that too much of our common discourse as political theorists is with our fellow theorists, a meta-conversation among people whose professional practice is thinking about political thinking. Concepts tend to become heuristic constructs of our own making, kept in careful isolation from their possible erosion through cavalier handling. Philosophers often claim to own political theory—think for example of how they have dominated the history of political thought, arranging it around a few 'geniuses' that crowd out the variety, richness and intricacy of political thinking through time and across space. But, by dint of the qualifier 'polit-

ical’—to put it bluntly—political theory is chiefly part of the social sciences and partakes of its empiricism, so that the study of politics, including the ubiquitous practice of thinking politically, involves investigating concepts in situ and in general discursive usage. The evidence may turn out to be messy and disjointed but the ensuing normality promises to be as fascinating, instructive, and relevant as the exceptional. When I first began analysing ideology, I was warned by a philosophy colleague that scholars who study ‘inferior’ thinking will invariably produce inferior work. Since then, I have realized that exploring inferior political thinking is indeed part of my metier but, as historians and linguists well know, the ordinariness, the inaccuracy or the misuse of that thinking are indispensable to—and part and parcel of—understanding how a society operates, and those features do not have to be mirrored in its professional analysis. Once again, this is where Marx got it wrong. The disciplinary predilections of many philosophers are simply unsuitable for the kind of scholarship required for unpacking the practices of thinking politically.

The second problematic of the proximity among the terms ‘key political concept’ concerns what exactly is the political to which those concepts refer? In many ways concepts can no longer meet the expectations that students of political thought used to have, because in the world of politics as it is played out key concepts are not necessarily at their rhetorical or succinct best. With the exception of national or emancipatory movements, directly expressed macro political concepts such as ‘give me liberty or give me death’ or ‘power to the people’ are by now far less likely to be heard in the public domain than, say, the more specifically targeted ‘black lives matter’. Much of this has to do with a modified understanding of the political not as something simply to do with governance, states and macro-institutionalization, let alone its universalization. The change concerns not merely what a key political concept is, but a greater appreciation of the political as an omnipresent set of processes and occurrences at all levels of human interaction, often incapable of being captured by conventional political concepts. It is not only that concepts are increasingly fragmenting and rupturing in common usage. More fundamentally for our vocation as political theorists, their precariousness now also lies in the difficulties *we* professionally encounter with them as analytical components.

In particular, we have become more alert to the subtleties epitomized through what concepts are and do and the diverse ways in which they serve as foci of analysis. To begin with, we may distinguish between a concept as a constituent of understanding and a concept as a constituent of

interpretation. One way of intimating that difference is to regard the former as related to knowledge—narrow, specific and veering towards ‘objective’ conclusiveness but vulnerable to paradigmatic shifts; while the latter relates to meaning—contingent, fluid and veering towards ‘subjective’ contextualization. Each comes with its precarities: inflexibility and authoritativeness, or ephemerality and competitive decontestation. On another dimension a political concept may indicate a unique and immediate happening or event; it may identify a repetitive practice; or a drawn-out process with a temporal dynamic. Here, too, subscribing to any of those introduces its own elusiveness and instabilities.

Old concepts thus appear in new, almost unrecognizable, guises. For the moment we extend the political beyond its conventional institutional forms and examine it in its far more inclusive mode as it occurs in human exchanges, we may—for example—want to allow the idea of ‘finality’ to replace older terms coined within different interpretative frameworks, such as authority, hegemony, or sovereignty. Those are all predominantly associated with affairs of state, well-captured in the once common German word *Staatswissenschaft*. The great gravitas of the latter concepts gives way when they are recalibrated as the quest for finality—the inconclusive attempts to lock down contentious, ambiguous, indeterminate, or unattainable issues. That central feature of the political—its traditional and historical focus on authoritative decisiveness—is reduced in the bleak light of day at best to a process in the making, perhaps desired but never achieved for long. At that point its precariousness immediately become evident. It is bound to fail as much as to succeed in human affairs, lifting the burden from the heavy-weight connotations of authority or sovereignty, in whose contexts failure can be catastrophic (Freeden 2013). By ushering ordinary human beings into the circle of the political we extend it to embrace an indefinite raft of political interactions and practices at sub-state level. Concurrently, we humanize a process that otherwise seems too out of reach to penetrate into the intricate fabric of social life. And it is that fabric that must command our attention as political theorists, social scientists, and historians.

#### *4. From logocentrism to performativity: muted and silent language*

Another feature of the third stage is a partial retreat from the logocentrism of political thinking and its concepts. Political concepts are never merely expressed through words. They may have to be extracted from human per-



formativity or from fantasy, not just from speech and text. Their meaning may equally be obtained from the emotional force with which they are immediately accompanied. It is only in the minds of those wedded to the myth of liberal neutrality, or those who subscribe to a dry and desiccated rationality, that feelings and passions are not integrated into the ways concepts make sense and are employed politically. The actual playing out of political concepts is not *on* the page but *off* it—they are lived elements of thought and conduct that trace paths and outline fields where things occur, and in any of their specific manifestations they attract or repel emotions that add integral dimensions of meaning. The admixture of emotions into the realm of supporting or resisting conceptual permutations is hence one major factor in conceptual volatility. The unpredictability of their intensity can dislocate or weaponize the arguments and beliefs with which they are intertwined, though others may settle and calm them (Reddy 1997; Ahmed 2004). That is not incidental noise, nor a deflection from the alleged purity of the intellect, but fundamental to the concepts themselves.

A further recalibration entails that, given the requirement, nourished by political philosophers, of articulateness and clarity in expressing ideas and demands, it is disconcerting for many of them that political thinking is fed through a multiplicity of performative filters and—no less instructively—a range of alternating silences. Political concepts can be acted out concretely as practices and they often appear nameless and unheralded. The heuristic unit we call a political concept may not only disintegrate or overlap; it no longer is ‘automatically’ the clearest or most efficient conveyor of political meaning. A notable precariousness of political concepts lies in their occasional inability to be voiced, and—when voiced—to be heard, and when heard, to be understood. As Pierre Bourdieu elegantly put it, ‘what goes without saying comes without saying’ (Bourdieu 1977: 167f.). Their anticipated chain of the production, transmission, and consumption of concepts is nebulous and requires deciphering at each of those distinct stepping stones. The test for political theorists is how to convert silent or obscured forms of expression, or those that are vocal or physical but not verbal, into the conceptual apparatus in which we have been trained. The question is whether you can act out a concept rather than verbalizing it: after all, politics is a field of activity. One answer is that you can, but the translation into the verbalized and logocentric concepts the profession of political theory still demands of us is complicated. Take keening, famously used in the 1980s as a deliberate political practice when thousands of women from all over the British Isles camped for months around the American nuclear

missile base at Greenham Common, south of Oxford. Keening is usually a funerary form of wailing, but in this case was a literal piercing through the logocentric disconnect, an attempt to circumvent the inadequacy of rational conversation with the soldiers who had heard their words but could not listen to their contents (Day 1984). The effective silence of failed verbalizing, and of having one's articulatory capacities culturally stifled, gave way to physical performativity and to a vocality that replaced speech with a quasi-cacophonous practice, utilized as a counterweight to articulate-ness and as an immediate expression of grief and frustration. It is a case of embodied political expression. Conceptually categorizing it under 'political protest' or 'civil disobedience' falls short of discharging the job expected of political conceptologists, either as an historical enterprise or as students of ideology.

There are also forms of verbal silence that have been specifically interpreted as conveying political conceptual meaning. Consider tacit consent, most famously evoked by John Locke. Consent to a government is a well-proven political concept. Does that also apply to tacit consent? Remarkably, political philosophers have almost exclusively focused on what kind of *consent* it represents, rather than on what can be inferred from collective *taciturnity* or *silence*. Locke is an early instance of a theorist who goes for performative rather than verbal indicators of consent: using the highway or taking up lodgings. But two caveats apply. First, whether those practices signal consent to a government or regime is highly arguable. Travelling on the highway may be sought for recreational purposes or to admire nature, visit a friend or purchase dinner. Renting a room may be dictated by the desire for personal comfort or security. There is a striking gap between what Locke identifies as politically tacit consent, alongside the ignorance of a community that they are participating in that concealed and politically unintentional practice. Consent has to be deliberately agentic to possess ethical and political weight.

Second, Locke himself shows no indication or theoretical awareness of identifying performativity as an analytical category in its own right. Only the hindsight available through more recent scholarly paradigms permits such an interpretation. The real political aspect of Locke's tacit consent requires a different decoding: it concerns the common political practice of appropriating or arrogating the voice of a particular public, not only without its permission but often without there being any plausible circumstances in which that public as an undifferentiated entity could articulate its views. We find the idea famously reincarnated by Nixon in his phrase

the ‘silent majority’ in the context of support for the Vietnam war in 1969, or by contemporary populists who commandeer the ‘will of the people’—both instances of superimposing external voice on silences abounding in a society. When, then, is an absent concept a concept? The current literature is on the whole unilluminating on this dodgy issue: How can we know for sure when a political concept comes into view? We may have to borrow from literary criticism, anthropology, or psychoanalysis to expand our purview, by identifying metaphors, emotional projections, or palimpsests that seemingly bury history and eradicate evidence (Freeden 2022b: 181-199).

*5. The ordinary, the trivial and the disingenuous: The challenge to conceptual analysis*

That question has recently become far more problematic. The study of political concepts has long been regarded as too elitist, too ‘up-down’ in its focus on the producers of political language and on who counts as an interpreter of a discourse that matters. True, critical discourse analysts have travelled in another deciphering direction, but they have in the main explored patterns of ordinary speech and writing with an eye on the pernicious, and with the intention of generating correctives to the culturally prejudiced and normatively harmful power acts ingrained in human communication (Wodak/Meyer 2009). That enterprise produces its own academic biases: a strong suspicion of political language as pejorative and manipulative, creating a serious disincentive to study it impartially. Between the elitist Scylla and the condemnatory Charybdis—the latter in effect another way of controlling and censoring the meaning of political concepts—the digitalized media have ostensibly emerged as the great levellers and barrier removers. But that has rarely been the case. Instead, we are witnessing not the democratization of political language and concepts—as was hoped by some—but their frequent reduction to demotics (Freeden 2022a: 191 ff.). The consequence is a democracy-challenging super-atomization of voices in the public domain. Ideologies and the political concepts of which they are composed are in pieces, dismantled, fractured, sporadic, discontinuous, inconsistent, even scavenged. There will of course be submerged continuities, discernible to scholars and researchers more than to the general public. But what has changed are patterns of communication, themes of recognizable durability, the articulators of ideology, and the standards now applied to publicly available discourse.

That illusory equalization of voice privileges the skilled spin doctors and the knee-jerk responders, miles away from the reflectiveness with which we as scholars endow the concepts we fine-tune and study. It has legitimated carelessness, sloppiness, and deception under the new banner of the all-welcoming internet. And it has diminished the only kind of 'elitism' that as scholars it is our responsibility to protect—that of treating words, concepts and arguments with respect.

Indicative of that recent insidious precariousness was the notorious phrase 'alternative facts', an improvised rhetorical tour de force launched a few years ago by Kellyanne Conway, counsellor to President Trump (Bradner 2017). That endeavour was designed to buy into the language of a mock epistemological pluralism—or if you wish, parallel universes of validating knowledge, in the service of establishing political 'truths.' It was meant to please pluralists, by seeming to blend into rational, liberal norms, but effectively inventing facts that would further your cause. Predictably, once that term entered the lexicon, no fact was secure from being doubted. The authority of the word 'fact' was deftly colonized and subverted by the fact-deniers, while those who aimed to pursue greater conceptual accuracy were forced to expend more effort in order to dispel the indeterminacy and ambiguity that undermined the worth of any statement, any fact, opinion, or value. This points to a serious chink in the armour of competing interpretative systems: competing not because ontologies clash—say religious and secular, or scientific and mythical—but competing due to the concoction of a spurious variety disguised as a reputable scientific methodology and masquerading as part of its validating logic (Freeden 2018: 1-9).

Inasmuch as a central feature of the political is the distribution and ranking of significance, that role dissolves under an assault on knowledge-based reasoning, and under the conceit that every utterance is equivalent to any other. The challenge is not primarily one of blocking the broadening of the circle of purveyors of meaning, of course. That broadening is certainly most welcome, and the more the merrier—pamphlets, newspaper editorials, cultural journals, parliamentary debates, letters, novels, even dinner table and pub conversations. The greater challenge is that of weeding out the falsifiers and fakers that undermine confidence in the legitimacy of the words and concepts we need to make sense of our worlds—a legitimacy not of their contents or even values, but of their genuineness. The elision of truth/falsehood boundaries is just another way of trivializing the practice of measured thinking and draining the words on which such thinking relies from reflective meaning. Ideologies have indeed always sought the

protection of science—evolutionary theory is one such example—but it is rare for them to appeal not to a corpus of findings but to an epistemological framework, even if it is a subterfuge that makes nonsense of what a fact is. In considering the ‘alternative facts’ tactic, we need to dismiss the common saying ‘the facts speak for themselves’. Facts cannot speak—they are permanently silent. It is people who superimpose their voices on those mute facts, appealing through that catchphrase to circular self-evidence as the authenticator of truth. Even the authors of the opening lines of the American Declaration of Independence, who at least shared a noble purpose in designing their prose, took self-evidential meaning for granted. No such calling dignifies the alternative fact-fabricators, who pursue their mission while knowingly undermining the conceptual and interpretative solidity that underpins the unspoken contract of reliability guiding responsible scholarship.

The dilemma, however, is that of choosing between conceptual pedantry or being prepared to go with the flow of ordinary, even obstructive, thinking. The gauntlet tossed down by the mass circulation and prominence of the demotic is plain. With high-level ideological constructs the scholarly community comfortably slid into similar complexities of analysis. But with the vernacular language in which ideologies are formulated that looks like overkill. We can’t adopt or replicate those discourses, as would a political philosopher analyzing a weighty text. We can’t employ colloquial outpourings through impulse, private grievance, and self-publicity by internet as substantive ideological building blocks. There is little point in exposing some of their illogicalities because that is to take a sledgehammer to a nut. Instead, we present such texts as exhibits rather than as serious arguments. We tend to abandon their ideational features in favour of what they might represent—as codes, or mentalities, or emotional states of mind. We would have to give way to different disciplines such as social psychology, discourse analysis, and communications theory. They are all important knowledge enterprises, but not at the heart of what political theorists do and enjoy doing. We are removed, distant, uninvolved with, and unappreciative of, the soundbites of current ideological expression—few eureka moments or cerebral pleasure to be garnered there. Of course, it is sincerely to be desired that bridges be built and extended between all those fields, including empirical political science. But first and foremost, ideologies are types of political thinking and we have to find ways of expressing that through evolving scholarly vocabularies.

If there is a way forward for political theorists to cope with everyday thinking and expression, it must be this. We need to relax our focus on the formalism of conceptual concatenations with their set paths (though of course not abandon them) and switch our attention to decoding discursive patterns, discarding our distaste for some of them. Those patterns and the concepts that sustain them are subject to re-layering, they undergo continual cut-and-paste processes, and they emanate from more than one location. Their collocations also change vis-à-vis each other at different speeds. True, adjacent and peripheral concepts within an ideological cluster always mutated faster than the cores around which they revolved. But those cores can no longer provide the anchoring points with the durability and recognizability of the past. They are no longer held in check by the high priests of a belief system, and—like all forms of thinking politically in a society—they vary greatly in intelligibility, gravitas, and format. That is the nature of ideologies—another reason why political philosophers don't take them seriously but students of political practices absolutely should, for we need to be acquainted with the raw materials of our profession in all its forms: the good, the bad, and the ugly. No doubt, the study of political language could do with a little more humour, innovation, and improvisation without losing its dignity, but it is a raucous playground or a semantic free-for-all at its peril. Crucially, however—unlike the opinion of my philosopher interlocutor—studying those languages does not have to entail adopting their faults.

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