

**“The Confessions of a Repeat Offending and  
Unrepentant Conceptualist”**

**Philippe C. Schmitter**

**Mattei Dogan Prize Ceremony**

**IPSA World Congress**

**Santiago de Chile**

**15 de julio de 2009**

**When I was informed of this Award, my initial reaction was  
“Why Me?” Guillermo O’Donnell was the first winner of it and I  
know why he was chosen, but I am not Guillermo.**

**I thought and immediately rejected several of the usual  
suspects:**

**1) Service to the Profession**

**I have not been active in either IPSA or any other national  
political science association – and especially not in my own,**

**the APSA. I do not regularly go to their annual meetings. I have been virtually allergic to all institutional aspects of “the discipline.” For six painful months, I did once serve as the chair of my department at the EUI, but I managed to get out of that as soon as I could. At Chicago and Stanford, no one – not even my closest colleagues -- would have considered making me their chair.**

## **2) Publications in Prestigious, Peer-Reviewed Journals**

**I have never published an article in the APSR. In fact, I have never even submitted a manuscript to it or to many other highly ranked American journals! I am, however, proud of the fact that I have published pieces in the national political science journals of some 13 other countries – some of them in very obscure places and languages – but since when has that been regarded as so important?**

## **3) ‘Scientific’ Knowledge in the Discipline**

**I am also convinced that it has not been my net contribution to improving the scientific status or adding to the empirical content of political science. I admit to having conducted a lot**

**of interviews, gathered systematically data from public sources in several countries, designed and applied a few questionnaires, run early versions of IBM card-sort machines to produce cross-tabulations, regressed mountains of aggregate data on each other and even having tried my hand at factor and small space analysis. These days I am deep into a topographic analysis of the relationship between varieties of capitalism and types of democracy. I am not apologetic about having done this and am still proud of the associations I discovered and the inferences I made based on them. But, again, there are many out there in this audience who have more to show for such efforts than I have.**

#### **4) Follower of Trendy Theories**

**I have never been nor am I presently a card-carrying member of any of the fashionable theories that have swept through the discipline during my career. I have neither been a behaviourist, nor a structural-functionalist, nor a systems theorist, nor a rational-choicist. Indeed, I have been manifestly sceptical about all of them. I would even refuse to accept the presently appealing designation of “historical**

**institutionalist,” although it comes closer to identifying me than any other.**

**5) So, this leaves only one plausible reason for awarding me the Mattei Dogan Prize: I have been a conceptualist. I have been in the business of identifying patterns of political phenomena, sticking labels on them and exploring their consequences as well as their causes.**

**In this regard, I have been fortunate to have worked on three weakly related and profoundly ambiguous topics and to do so in a wide variety of settings, both temporal and spatial. This has compelled me to think laterally – to search for analogies that stretched from one to the other and for concepts coming from other substantive issues or academic disciplines. I have had to jump around rather than to forge ahead in concentrated pursuit of one research objective.**

**The first, regional integration, was a novel political phenomenon lodged uncomfortably between two separate literatures (international relations and comparative politics)**

**that could not be explained by the premises, concepts or mechanisms of either. But fortunately for me, it was already being masterfully explored by my mentor at Berkeley, Ernst B. Haas. All I had to do was follow in his footsteps (even after he declared them “obsolescent”) and also to push inquiry into regions other than Western Europe. It was precisely the failure of trans-national integration in Central America and South America that led me to re-conceptualize the bases for its success in Western Europe, as well as the range of its possible outcomes.**

**The second was the politics of organized interests which was a well-established field of research completely dominated by a single paradigm associated with a single country, the United States. Pluralism offered me as a graduate student a varied and powerful set of assumptions, concepts and findings which I was fortunate enough to take to Brazil in my dissertation project – where they manifestly did not fit! Again, it was the failure to conform to expectations or established wisdom that provided just the stimulus I needed to conceive of an alternative mode of interest intermediation which I called**

**corporatism. The fact that in order to find this concept and to extract all of its attributes and implications I had to move back in time and elsewhere in space made the effort all the more “lateral.”**

**The third, democratization, was hardly a novel phenomenon, but it was surprisingly “under-conceptualized” and “under-theorized.” What Guillermo O’Donnell, our collaborators in the Woodrow Wilson Project and I discovered in the early 1980s was an enormous and highly influential literature that stressed the static relationship between so-called structural and cultural pre-requisites and the stability of a few “Western” liberal-democratic regimes. There was virtually nothing theoretically intuitive and generally relevant (except for an obscure article by Dankward Rostow) about how these regimes came into being! Moreover, the countries that then interested us in Southern Europe and Latin America had none of these alleged pre-requisites. This time it was not frustrated empirical expectations but frustrated normative desires that led us to develop an alternative “possibilist” conceptualization of Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. And, I admit a bit to my**

**surprise, our “thoughtful wishing” turned out to be empirically and not just normatively correct.**

**So, I think that I am being honoured primarily for my role as a “conceptualist.” This has caused me to reflect on how I have gone about this unusual task. What are the “Tricks of the Trade” of such a rare specialization in political science? Why is one concept better than another? How does one size up an existing literature and improve on it? And, what do you do if there is virtually nothing to begin with?**

**I will condense my retrospective thoughts on this matter into nine sets of observations.**

**1. I begin (why not?) with Aristotle: “It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things (read: discipline or sub-discipline) just so far as the nature of the subject admits” Nicomachaen Ethics, Book 1, Chapter 3, 2-3.**

**In our times, I have taken this to mean that conceptualization in political science must acknowledge and, therefore, reflect**

**the growing complexity and contingency of its various subject matters (Reference to EPSR article, Vol. I, No. 1). This means, in my view, that the most useful new concepts will be multi-variate in their composition and fuzzy in their boundaries. Ideal-types as developed by Max Weber or constructive-types as I prefer to think of them are the most obvious instruments. These cannot be “dis-aggregated” into simple modules of individual action or rational choice and subsequently “re-aggregated” in order to explain -- always *ex post* -- collective institutions or decisions. Their utility depends specifically on the sum of their contingent effects, i.e. on changing linear into non-linear relations, on evoking dormant or suppressed motivations, on adjusting preferences to emerging conditions, or on turning anticipated into unanticipated outcomes.**

**2. The search for conceptual innovation usually begins with the perception of an empirical anomaly – especially one that affects more than one unit. Singular anomalies tend to be dismissed or explained away as the product of “political culture” or some unique historical configuration. But when there is a disparity between theoretically expected behaviours**



**or between actor assumptions about anticipated outcomes in several locations – or in a “crucial case” where such expectations were initially very high -- then, then there is an obvious opportunity for finding a new or revised concept that seems to explain that anomaly. Not infrequently, these ambiguous spaces tend to open up between the specialized and well-defended sub-disciplines of political science – in my case, between comparative politics and international relations. These spaces can also emerge from the sort of “lateral thinking” that comes from working simultaneously on several substantive problems and reading widely in adjacent literatures. Focusing on a single issue from the perspective of a single approach – however appealing to the scholar and rewarded by the discipline – is not the usual way to come up with conceptual innovations.**

***NB that the conceptualist is rarely a theorist – at least, not at the beginning. The urge is to find a lexica that is not incompatible with a pre-existing schemata – a new word not a new grammar – but one that “fits better” within the more encompassing pre-existing paradigm. However modest the***

*initial intention, new concepts can develop into highly contentious “Kuhnian paradigm shifters” and, thereby, bring down the wrath of “main-streamers” within the discipline. I learned from Albert Hirschmann (he called it the Streeten Maxim) that “no theory or paradigm is ever defeated by data, only by another and better theory or paradigm.”*

**3. To be convincing and work effectively, a new or re-furbished concept should not be just a descriptor of an empirical or normative anomaly. It should also include a reference to a plausible political mechanism or process that connects with the unexpected or the unwanted. Rarely will this be an entirely novel functional connection, intentional logic or normative reaction. Usually, it involves the identification of some ignored or overlooked arrangement that brings to bear on a given subject-matter the usual causes, reasons and motives but in a novel combination. For political scientists almost always this means a relationship of power that endures long enough to produce observable and predictable effects, i.e. an institution or, more modestly, a rule of prudence. They are not only the most visible manifestations of anomalous**

**behaviour, but they are also the most likely to produce consequential outcomes.**

***NB that not all conceptual innovations are linked to institutions, but new concepts that purport to refer to major transformations in values, shifts in material preferences, changes in the basis of political calculation, and so forth are usually met with greater professional and public scepticism. Compared to institutions or processes, they are much more difficult to observe in a direct and convincing fashion – although the recent success of “social trust” suggests that this is not always the case. Sometimes a concept is useful precisely because it can only be inferred vicariously and not measured precisely.***

**4. The simplest tactic for a conceptualist is just to add “neo-“ or “post-“ in front of an existing term – implying a temporal shift in its meaning or consequences. Another I have used frequently is to make creative use of antimonies. Take the existing causal assumption and invert it, for example, by making pre-requisites into post-requisites. (e.g. “civic political**

**culture”). Or explore further a prominent ideal-type by imagining its opposite, with each of its sub-components taking on an inverse property – and then see if that fits the observed anomaly. That, of course, is what I did with pluralism and corporatism – and Juan Linz did with his distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.**

**5. All concepts in political science are historical and, hence, draw their relevance from the temporal sequences and bounded contexts in which they are discovered and placed by the scholar. Which does not mean that one cannot “fish them out” of another epoch – I have done this several times – but only with the explicit understanding that they are bound to be different when resuscitated this time around. It is wise to assume that all but very few and very recent political phenomena have already been identified and labelled – somewhere. The trick is to discover who said it, when and in what context. In so doing, the conceptualist will learn a lot about surrounding normative assumptions and socio-political pre-conditions, and this should be of assistance when it comes to re-inserting the old concept into its new setting.**

**Moreover, once this has been done successfully, the concept will continue to change – often in ways that are unexpected by its author. For a good political concept acquires its own life – and half-life. The more often it is used (which inevitably involves placing it in different contexts and associating it with other concepts), the more its meaning will change from the original. Often, I have discovered, this is evidenced by the placing of an increasing number and variety of adjectives in front of it.**

***NB Do not try to fight against this. One can remind the profession repeatedly of the ‘pure’ meaning originally attached to the concept and continue to defend the prescribed scope of its applicability, but there is no way conceptualists can “legislate” the eventual use of their products. Perhaps this is why many of the most useful concepts in political science have been and continue to be “essentially contested.” The conceptualist should take a certain pride in the multiplicity of (distorted) meanings and (mis-)uses that emerge in response to his or her innovation. This is an unobtrusive (if annoying)***

*indicator of success. My experience suggests that, at some point, one is better off simply walking away from one's creation and focusing attention on some other subject of inquiry.*

**6. All concepts – new, old or revived – are embedded in a wider set of prior assumptions and other concepts. They are “building blocks” that are only as plausible and valuable as the foundations upon which they rest. No one of them works alone, even though it may take considerable theoretical explication and empirical research to bring out how wide and extensive these foundations really are. My experience suggests that the conceptualist is often not aware of the extent of this embeddedness at the beginning and only learns about it once the concept is being used (and criticized) by others.**

**The most difficult skill to acquire is not that of identifying the core meaning of a concept, but that of learning when to assert closure around it – especially if, as I have argued above, the most valuable concepts should be capable of reflecting the**

**increased complexity and contingency of contemporary politics. Precisely because they are so embedded, it is difficult to separate any one concept from its context. Just because concepts have to be multi-dimensional, it is difficult to decide what should be included as one of their multiple defining elements and what should be excluded. Where does one draw the line between endogeneity and exogeneity with regard to such concepts? These are strategic choices for which there are few guidelines that I know of. Collaboration with another scholar – especially when it involves very intensive verbal interaction (i.e. arguing with each other) – can be helpful in drawing these lines. Once two minds have settled on a compound definition and its fuzzy boundaries, it is much more likely to survive the subsequent scrutiny of less well-disposed others. But there is no way to avoid the need for reification, i.e. to settle eventually on a prescribed set of attributes that are presumed to cohere and to persist at least long enough to produce some effect – whether one does this alone or with someone else. To deny this (and I think many “post-modernists” would do so) would be to assert that politics takes place in such a state of constant flux and mutation that**

**all we can aspire to do would be to produce momentary snapshots or idiosyncratic descriptions of that reality.**

**7. All concepts are doubly normative in the sense that they evoke positive or negative reactions from those described by them and invoke positive or negative evaluations from the scholar who uses them. Try as hard as one may, no political concepts can be completely neutral and, the more important they are, the more likely their deployment will be perceived as having a differential impact upon the “real-existing” political process. Unless the analysts and protagonists all come from the same unusually homogeneous culture, there is a high likelihood that these concepts, especially the more innovative ones, will provoke different responses and, therefore, that the work of conceptualists will become controversial. Indeed, if it is not, their concepts are probably so bland or non-committal as to be worthless. In other words, the conceptualization of politics tends to become part of the process of politics itself and nowhere is this more the case than in liberal democracies where actors are free and even encouraged to take up and work out the implications of any linguistic innovation. Without**



**the ability to argue about words (and to reach compromises based on them), the only way that political conflicts can be resolved would be by force or the threat of it. However, it is this intrinsic controversiality that is so valuable for conceptualists because it virtually guarantees that all of their significant innovations will be scrutinized for meanings and implications by a variety of actors – and that competition (plus their application by scholars in comparative research) will ensure that only the fittest of them will survive -- one can hope.**

***NB This Darwinian optimism may often be misplaced since it ignores the presence of powerful groups within both the polity and the discipline of political science with not just normative but also vested material, career and status interests in the persistence of established conceptualizations (and the methodological tools so often linked to them). When and where these two groups are de facto allied with each other and the prevailing concepts benefit them both, innovations may not get a fair hearing and only those that reinforce the dominant paradigm may get through.***

**8. Almost all political science concepts – even the most innovative ones -- have an ordinary language origin and, therefore, prior meaning. Scholars often use the device of placing quotation marks or inverted commas around the normal term as if that would be sufficient to separate it from the scientific one. It seems to me better to assume that the two are indissoluble and to use this to advantage. The everyday language invented by politicians and those who directly observe them (i.e. journalists and editorialists) to explain to themselves and others what they are doing should be treated as a major potential source of inspiration.**

**[Reference to “Les Intraduisibles”] One should never forget that most of politics is about words – their use or misuse and not their clarity or precision – and that the outcome of these struggles for linguistic dominance can have real consequences.**

**I have been fortunate to have done research and to have lived in two countries, Brazil and Italy, with unusually creative political lexicons and this has proven very useful to me. No one who studies the process of European integration can afford to overlook the extraordinarily rich “supra-national”**

**language that has grown up around its practices – sometimes referred to as “Euro-speak.” Knowing several languages and immersing oneself in the context in which they are spoken thus can be of obvious advantage to the conceptualist. Admittedly, the overlap between ‘normal’ and ‘scholarly’ languages can lead to mutual confusion, but it can also be an important source of potential insight and further development since the reactions of “ordinary” observers (especially of political participants and politicians) can alert the conceptualist to the presence of substantive meanings (and normative reactions) that would be missed by a purely academic audience. The conclusion is un-escapable (at least, to me) that academics can only re-conceptualize political reality within the admittedly vague and movable parameters imposed by those who practice within it – whether they are in or out of power.**

***NB Beware of concepts that fail to “resonate” beyond the academic audience to which they are originally addressed. They are probably based on unrealistic assumptions or unrealizable principles. [Dahl’s polyarchy” as an interesting***

***marginal example. Bar in Krakov] The dialogical process of acceptance and rejection by other (sub-) disciplines and wider publics that tends to surround the reception of conceptual innovations constitutes an important instrument of “self-correction.” The strongest test comes when a concept is “stretched” and applied to cases it was not originally intended to cover. This point also suggests the proper place to be on the “ladder of abstraction,” namely, on the highest rung upon which one can communicate to both specialists and generalists, to professional students of politics and amateur practitioners of it. Needless to say, the more of these that “pick up on” a given concept (even if negatively), the greater its success – even if that probably entails a dissolution and even a distortion of its original intent.***

**9. The *mestiere* of conceptualist in political science should be a part-time one – unlike the more prestigious full-time ones of theorist, methodologist, empiricist and (more recently) modelist. To do it well requires frequent interaction with “real-existing” political actors, reading lots of newspaper articles and editorials, immersing oneself in ancient texts by**

**sometimes obscure authors, working on several topics at the same time, engaging in periodic bouts of data-gathering and crunching and accepting invitations to give talks in exotic places. Not only will these “distractions” provide inspiration for coming up with new (or renewed) concepts, but they also help to correct for the inevitable distortions and abeyances in one’s artefactual products. No doubt it helps to know one’s own language well and there is no better way of doing so than to learn as many other languages as possible. Incidentally, using (and in my case abusing) Latin can be especially useful since it helps to distance ones concepts from their original national associations – and, of course, it makes one sound more learned. Living and teaching in different places during one’s career is also not a bad idea. Collaborating closely with scholars who know more than you and who come from different countries and intellectual traditions – Guillermo O`Donnell, Wolfgang Streeck and Claus Offe, for example – has kept me going laterally. My most important and enduring collaborator has been Terry Karl, who for 30 years has made critical contributions to my work and has come up with many creative concepts of her own. My doctoral students at**

**Chicago, Stanford, the EUI, the CEU and other more occasional places have also been frequent sources of inspiration – and I think that they know this. They have come from an unusual diversity of places and backgrounds – and this has been of inestimable value. Some of my best thoughts about politics come from discussions with them during office hours.**

**For those of you who are just starting in the profession, your career prospects are not great should you choose this line of work. No department or faculty that I know of has a designated slot for a “conceptualist.” You will have to make it at first under some other *rubrique* of the profession and you will need to have acquired a general knowledge about politics, history and language before coming up with something valuable. Moreover, your contributions – once you make them – will be criticised from diverse perspectives – not only by other academic specialists who will think that you are intruding on their turf, but also by politicians and activists who will accuse you of distorting their motives or helping their opponents. Worse of all, your best concepts will eventually be appropriated and assimilated into the mainstream – not**

**infrequently without attribution. The keepers of orthodoxy in the discipline may even pay you the ultimate insult and accuse you of merely “having put new labels on (their) old bottles.” Theories have authors; methods have schools; models have status – concepts have only “sources” and they tend to fade away with time. The better a given concept “fits” and becomes useful within the existing *corpus*, the less relevant becomes the identity of the person who created it.**

**I have no regrets. I have enjoyed being a part-time conceptualist. And the Mattei Dogan Award from IPSA comes as an unexpected, but very gratifying reminder that my peers have recognized me as the source of a few conceptual innovations. I thank all of you who thought I was worthy of receiving this Award ward – and for your attention to this talk.**