4

A Warning

Maintaining Conceptual Boundaries in the Era of Democratic Anxiety

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How distinctive and hard should the conceptual boundaries be that scholars draw in their research on major political questions, such as democracy versus nondemocracy, and major mechanisms for undermining or destroying democracy, such as coups? Comparativists have long disagreed on this important question. Qualitatively oriented scholars embrace a classificatory approach and draw sharp, categorical borderlines (Sartori 1970). In this view, polities are democratic or not; there is an identifiable line of separation. By contrast, quantitative researchers think in terms of fine gradations or continua and measure how democratic different polities are – where they lie on a spectrum ranging from democracy to autocracy (see, e.g., Elkins 2000).

In the twenty-first century, this long-standing debate has skewed increasingly to the gradational position. The Zeitgeist highlights – indeed celebrates – hybridity and fluidity, even on basic issues hitherto regarded by many as naturally binary, such as gender. This flexibilizing spirit has also pervaded political science. In the study of democracy, for instance, the most vibrant and productive agenda has been the discussion of hybrid regimes, especially "competitive authoritarianism" (Levitsky and Way 2010). Historical researchers have also embraced hybridity, for instance by emphasizing moves toward fascism among the authoritarian dictatorships proliferating during the interwar years (Pinto and Kallis 2014) and by applying the term "fascism" ever more broadly to contemporary phenomena such as Vladimir Putin's Russia and right-wing populism, especially that of Donald Trump (Snyder 2021, 2022). The emphasis on hybridity has affected the analysis of specific political mechanisms as well. For instance, scholars have broadened the notion of coups by labeling politicized impeachments as "legislative coups" (Helmke 2017: 102–25), "parliamentary coups" (Santos and Guarnieri 2016), or "neocoups" (Pereira da Silva 2021).

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A principal reason for this hybridization, that is, the softening and broadening of previously delimited categories via the attenuation or erasure of qualitative distinctions, is the intense normative concern about the contemporary threats to democracy, which have arisen especially from right-wing populism, even in the West.[1] Because liberal pluralism faces worldwide challenges, academics see the need for effective warnings and the mobilization of counterforces. Yet in the current marketplace of ideas, sober, differentiated analyses risk getting drowned out. There is a high premium on stark alerts and attention-grabbing language, reinforced by the proliferation of social media. Now that more scholars act as public intellectuals, they increasingly prefer dramatic, charged terms. Calling Trump a populist, while accurate and fully justified, lacks impact – but accusing him of fascist tendencies and of coup mongering may shock citizens into defensive action. Scholars' growing activism not only affects public discourse but also filters back into their academic pursuits, as reflected in recent American Political Science Association journals.

Specifically, concerns about democracy's fate have motivated an asymmetrical form of hybridization, namely the broader, looser usage of harm-related, negatively charged terms. What psychology calls "concept creep" (Haslam 2016) has also affected political science: stark terms for especially serious problems, such as *fascism* and *coup*, as well as *crisis*, *genocide*, *racism*, *terrorism*, and *violence*, have been extended beyond their original sphere of denotation. They are now applied to a wider set of cases, which are seen as partaking in the problem as "diminished subtypes" marked by qualifying labels (cf. Collier and Levitsky 1997), such as "legislative coups" (Helmke 2017: 102–25) or "pre-fascism" (Snyder 2021: 32, 36, 39). Thus, definitional criteria have been softened, based on the claim of underlying equivalences.

This broader, looser usage of dramatic terms and the asymmetrical embrace of conceptual hybridity are problematic, however, especially given current threats to democracy. The attenuation of conceptual boundaries jeopardizes descriptive precision and analytical clarity; treating different phenomena as essentially similar, without regard for qualitative differences, hinders valid inference. Imprecise diagnoses in turn risk suggesting misleading advice on remedial action, which threatens the very normative goals that help fuel conceptual softening and broadening. Contesting Trump as a fascist, rather than the populist he really is, may prove not only ineffective but also counterproductive.

How so? The move toward hybridization and the corresponding dilution of qualitative conceptual differences are analytically problematic. Thorough understanding requires precise categorization that accurately captures similarities and differences. Extending terms such as *fascism*, *coup*, *genocide*, and *terrorism* beyond their core meaning and labeling a widening range of

[1] This and the following five paragraphs draw substantially on Weyland (2024: 603–10).

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phenomena as their diminished subtypes suggests essential equivalences that are questionable. "Concept creep" (Haslam 2016) overrates similarities and downplays relevant differences, for instance between a presidential ouster imposed by military force versus a rushed impeachment decided exclusively by civilian politicians. Similarly, Trump differs fundamentally from fascists, who eagerly fueled mass terror. Given political science's rich, differentiated set of concepts, there is no analytical justification or benefit in calling the US populist some version of fascist, and neologisms such as "pre-fascism" (Snyder 2021: 32, 36, 39) remain nebulous.

Furthermore, concept creep is problematic for the normative goals that drive concerned academics' move toward public intellectualism. After all, the effective defense of liberal pluralism requires an accurate assessment of the real threat. To design proper countermeasures, one needs a precise understanding of the danger. Fascism, for instance, constitutes a very different threat than populism. Indeed, disqualifying a populist leader as a monstrous fascist risks backfiring and producing the opposite of the intended result. Populists thrive on grievances about exclusion by the political establishment; exaggerated counterattacks "prove" their complaints and foster their recruitment of followers. Thus, the use of overly stark language, a product of concept creep, may inadvertently strengthen the threat to democracy, rather than bringing relief.

In the long run, the growing overuse of stark terms also risks exhausting countermobilizational energies. As Albert Hirschmann (1982) and Sidney Tarrow (2011: chap. 10) show, citizen engagement is cyclical, not constantly sustainable. If democracy's defenders proclaim emergencies all the time, participation will soon drop. As Aesop warned, one should not cry wolf too easily. Equating current problems to much bigger threats that prevailed in the past also risks demoralization. For instance, notions of "legislative coup" suggest that the international community's efforts to prohibit full-scale coups, which has led to a striking decline in military interventions, did not bring qualitative improvement (for a similar argument, see Wimmer 2015: 2192–94). Why, then, continue to mobilize, if all the prior work did not make a real difference? In sum, concept creep may – paradoxically – hinder the normative goals that its promoters pursue.

Given the present threats to democracy, it is especially important to recognize and respect qualitative differences and avoid the conceptual softening and broadening that has spread with asymmetrical hybridization. Even for scholars who shy away from Giovanni Sartori's categorical rigor, who rejected conceptual hybrids out of hand as incongruous "cat-dogs" (1991: 247–49; see Van Kessel 2014 on populism), the global conjuncture suggests strong reasons for a return to careful conceptual differentiation, terminological soberness, and circumspection in the usage of dramatic, charged labels. In the pragmatic spirit of Collier and Adcock (1999), my chapter invokes two of their arguments to advocate the strictly delimited usage of major terms that speak to democracy's

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contemporary predicament. To cover a range of phenomena, this discussion focuses both on a major autocratic ideology and regime type, namely fascism, and on a specific democracy-destroying mechanism, namely coups. These threats are particularly relevant during the global wave of populism, which in its right-wing versions has often been associated with fascism and which has been accused of spearheading coups, as in Trump's incitement of the invasion of Congress in January 2021 (Calhoun 2021; Snyder 2021). Consequently, a number of authors focus on both of these threats to contemporary democracy (e.g., Santos and Guarnieri 2016; Archondo 2020; Snyder 2021).

In their open and pluralistic discussion of the reasons for embracing conceptual gradations or preferring "dichotomies," Collier and Adcock (1999) highlight two important arguments that can sustain qualitative distinctions and solid conceptual boundaries.[2] For analytical and normative reasons, these two arguments seem especially important for the proper, narrow delimitation of notions such as fascism and coup. After explaining and applying these two points, I mention a corollary (Adcock and Collier 2001: 534–36) that further strengthens the case for well-bounded concepts.

Collier and Adcock's (1999) first argument concerns the empirical distribution of cases: Do they spread out fairly evenly along a spectrum, or do they cluster in distinctive, largely separate groupings? As regards fascism, there is clear clustering, most visible at the regime level. During the so-called era of fascism in the interwar years, right-wing regimes fell into two separate groupings: the totalitarian fascism of Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany versus the conservative authoritarianism prevailing in many other countries. The two fascist regimes arose from the state's mobilizational takeover by bottom-up mass movements, rather than the top-heavy intra-regime machinations, self-coups, or military impositions that imposed the other dictatorships (Weyland 2021: chaps. 5, 7–8). Those dictatorships embodied static, exclusionary authoritarianism, whereas fascism was a variant of energetic, coercively inclusionary totalitarianism, a qualitatively different regime type in Juan Linz's valuable classification (2000).

Owing to these basic differences, there was no viable fusion and true hybrid. The quick demise of the only attempt to join conservative authoritarianism and fascist totalitarianism on fairly equal terms proves those regimes' incompatibility. In 1940, Romania's military leader Ion Antonescu sought to overcome the unbreakable stalemate between the preceding royal dictatorship and the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael by forming a full co-government, the National Legionary State. But inherent and uncontrollable divergences quickly erupted into civil war. After suppressing the fascists with military force, Antonescu imposed typical authoritarianism (Sandu 2014: 323, 329–57; Weyland 2021: 22–23, 197–98, 272–74). Thus, the National Legionary mule was not only infertile but decomposed right after birth.

[2] See Chapter 11, this volume.

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Similarly, instances of executive removal tend to follow distinct modes: They are either initiated and executed by the military in openly illegal and unconstitutional ways, or decided by courts or the legislature without substantial military involvement. In Latin America, a region with large numbers of presidential ousters, coups clearly prevailed until the end of the Cold War; thereafter, by contrast, the frequent impeachments and other evictions have been civilian-led (Pérez-Liñán 2007), without any military interference even in controversial cases such as the politicized removal of Brazil's Dilma Rousseff (2016) and the "express impeachment" of Paraguay's Fernando Lugo (2012). The only intermediate case, the Congress-approved and allegedly court-ordered detention of Honduras' Manuel Zelaya by the military (2009) (Ruhl 2010), has remained exceptional. Thus, there are mostly coups or noncoups, no hybrids.

The underlying reason for this distinctive, bifurcated clustering is that many political phenomena constitute "bounded wholes," another important argument mentioned by Collier and Adcock (1999). Accordingly, fascism constituted a syndrome: A comprehensive, codified ideology of extremist millenarianism designed by a supremely charismatic leader inspired total mass mobilization and drove widespread violence and systematic terror. The leader's monopolistic position and fervent support and the brutal suppression of alternative voices sustained this totalitarian dynamic. All the constitutive elements of fascism reinforced each other and formed interlocking parts of a bounded whole.

Conservative authoritarianism, by contrast, lacks this expansive, transformational impetus and energetic dynamism. This fundamental difference precluded its hybridization with fascism. Although interwar dictators often imported fascist innovations in bits and pieces, these alien elements did not "work" when transplanted into the arid soil of authoritarianism; devoid of mobilizational energy, they remained empty shells and soon withered away. The youth movements, monopolistic regime parties, and government-controlled leisure organizations that right-wing dictators copied from fascist Italy and Germany lacked vibrancy and clout; members mostly went through the motions. For instance, whereas fascist regimes rested on voluntary, fervent mass mobilization from the bottom up, conservative authoritarians formed regime-supporting parties from the top down. But these stale replicas, filled by political opportunists and state-dependent bureaucrats, lacked commitment and dynamism (Weyland 2021: 220–22, 225–27). Outside their original regime context, fascist elements played little role and failed to transform the functioning and character of conservative authoritarianism.

The notion of bounded wholes applies not only to ideological systems and regimes but also to interlocking processes. As regards presidential ousters, in contexts where the usage of organized coercion is feasible, actors concentrate on knocking at the barracks' doors; even when other institutions get involved (such as Chile's Congress in its anti-Allende declaration of August 1973),

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they merely signal support for, or opposition to, military intervention, the decisive mechanism. Thus, actors focus on one mode of presidential removal, which follows a distinctive dynamic (Singh 2014). By contrast, where open coercion for removing a president is infeasible, for instance owing to international prohibition, the logic of civilian politics holds sway. In congressional impeachments or declarations of impairment, a different dynamic takes over as voting alignments become crucial and electoral politicians turn pivotal (Pérez-Liñán 2007: chaps. 3, 6).

Collier and Adcock's (1999) two arguments have an important corollary (Adcock and Collier 2001: 534–36): For proper conceptualization, the simple listing and addition of specific elements and indicators is insufficient; instead, it is crucial to consider the contribution and meaning of these elements. Researchers therefore need to go beyond a checklist approach and employ qualitative judgments. The same element can play different roles, depending on the systemic context (bounded whole).

Authors who proclaim the hybridization of authoritarianism and fascism in interwar dictatorships are overly impressed by the number of fascist elements that conservative authoritarians imported. But this quasi-empirical assessment is misleading because these elements operated deficiently in authoritarian systems; they lacked the energetic dynamism of fascism and largely remained empty shells. Mass organizations, for instance, did not thrive on genuine bottom-up participation but limped along, based on reluctant compliance with government directives. Implanted in infertile soil, the imported bits and pieces of fascism did not come together into a functioning whole. Despite these external trappings, the importing regimes remained thoroughly authoritarian (Weyland 2021: 225–27). Rather than simply pointing to these observable elements, scholars need to assess their actual operation and systemic role.

The same need for qualitative judgment applies to processes. It is potentially misleading to point to specific steps or stages, especially to regard one aspect as decisive. Instead, observers need to examine where an element appears in the sequential unfolding of events, what role it plays in the overall process, and whether it makes a causal contribution to the eventual outcome (Pérez-Liñán 2021).

For instance, scholars who label the resignation of Bolivian president Evo Morales in November 2019 as a coup point to the fact that this step followed the military leadership's public pronouncement "suggesting" the president's abdication (Levitsky and Murillo 2020: 5–6). But this simple piece of evidence is inconclusive. A military pronouncement can play a fundamentally different role depending on timing and context. Is it the first step that sets in motion a government's downfall or merely the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back? Bolivia's commanders spoke only after weeks of massive citizen protests over an unconstitutional reelection bid and a suspicious, widely questioned vote count. Eventually, police forces refused to repress the protests, and even the Bolivian workers' confederation, which had long supported Morales,

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recommended the president's resignation. Thus, the military commanders only came forth when the government's hold was already collapsing (Serrano Mancilla 2022: 64–66). Because the camel's back had already broken, the military "suggestion" lacked significant impact. Calling Morales' ouster a coup thus seems unjustified, as country experts agree (Archondo 2020; Lehoucq 2020; Wolff 2020).

This much-discussed case shows that pointing to a specific element or step in a process is insufficient. Instead, scholars must ascertain the causal impact of this step. Similarly, they need to analyze the functional contribution of specific elements to a system and bounded whole, as explained in my assessment of fascist transplants into authoritarianism. While straightforward and seemingly objective, a checklist approach risks superficiality; instead, observers must consider sequence and context to grasp the actual effect, role, and meaning of various steps and elements. Proper conceptualization requires qualitative judgment.

In conclusion, this chapter draws on Collier and Adcock's (1999) pragmatic approach to advocate circumspect concept formation and the avoidance of concept creep. Recent threats to democracy have induced scholars to soften and extend dramatic terms and employ notions such as fascism and coup more broadly in order to sound effective alarm and shock concerned citizens into democracy-defending actions. But this eagerness to attenuate or dissolve important conceptual boundaries, downplay the underlying qualitative differences, promote hybrid categories, and introduce nebulous neologisms such as "pre-fascism" or "neo-coup" is problematic not only for analytical purposes but for normative reasons as well. If Sartori (1991: 247–49) adopted Collier and Adcock's (1999) pragmatism, he would highlight that cat-dogs are neither good for catching mice nor for guarding sheep; what use, then, are pre-cats or neo-dogs?

Careful conceptualization shows, instead, that Vladimir Putin is not a fascist but a conservative authoritarian: He gained power through top-down appointment, not bottom-up mass mobilization; he does not employ widespread domestic terror and murder; he lacks a transformational, millenarian ideology; and he has not installed dynamic, utterly oppressive totalitarianism. Similarly, Trump is a right-wing populist, not a fascist. Despite his autocratic personality, he has not unleashed mass murder nor sought to impose a totalitarian dictatorship; and he certainly lacks a comprehensive, systematic ideology. Furthermore, the invasion of Congress in January 2021 was not a (self-) coup attempt. While Trump incited this haphazard assault, he did not centrally guide and direct it. The heterogeneous, not-well-coordinated participants had no operational plan nor realistic prospect for taking power. The police and military, decisive actors in any illegal, unconstitutional takeover, did not participate in the attack but first sought to stop it, and later evicted the invaders. With their excessively broad usage of dramatic terms such as *fascism* and *coup*, recent commentators (prominently Snyder 2021, 2022) do not enlighten the public but create additional confusion.

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Today's dire conjuncture calls not for further concept creep but the exact opposite: Scholars must reaffirm definitional distinctions that reflect qualitative differences and that are crucial for accurate diagnoses and the design of promising countermeasures. The defenders of liberal pluralism need level-headed assessments of the actual danger, which emerges from populism – not fascism, a very different phenomenon; and this danger advances via electoral manipulation – not coups, a very different mechanism. Crying wolf when one faces snakes, nowadays incarnated as snake-oil salesmen, is not a promising recipe. Relativizing criteria, broadening previously well-defined concepts, eroding fundamental differences, and postulating strained equivalences may have shock value and draw attention. But these hybridizing tendencies risk misguiding scholars and citizens alike, suggesting ill-targeted strategies and tactics, and exhausting valuable energies. A return to clear qualitative distinctions and to strict, fairly hard conceptual boundaries is crucial for coping successfully with this age of democratic anxiety.

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