# 10 Concepts and concept formation

Peter Mair

Most political and social science research, whether explicitly or implicitly, is comparative research. That is, most research is concerned with findings which are directly compared across countries or cases, or which can be tested against theories and inferences derived from such a comparison of countries and cases. Comparison also involves explanation, in that one of the principal reasons that we invoke comparisons is to explain how ostensibly different factors have led to similar outcomes, or how ostensibly similar situations have led to different outcomes. Why, for example, does turnout in national elections fall below 50 per cent in two countries as diverse as the United States and Switzerland (Franklin 2004)? And why has a far-right populist party, the Vlaams Belang, enjoyed substantial electoral success in the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium, while the equivalent party, the Front National, has failed miserably in the French-speaking region (Coffé 2005)?

The first, and in many ways most important lesson in developing and understanding these comparisons is to know whether like is being compared to like. Are the objects being compared – national electoral contests, far-right populist parties – similar to one another? Are they the same thing, or perhaps even functional equivalents? Or are they so different that any comparison between them is likely to prove meaningless? In England, when like cannot be compared to like, and hence when the objects involved are strikingly different, people tend to speak of chalk and cheese. This is indeed a difficult comparison, since on almost any of the key properties of the two objects – taste, capacity and so on – it is impossible to substitute one for the other. Think of chalk sandwiches, or using cheese to write on blackboards. In the Netherlands, the most striking differences are treated as being analogous to apples and pears. Here the contrast does not seem so sharp. Both are sweet seasonal fruits,

I am grateful to Jørgen Møller, Cas Mudde and Karin Tilmans for many useful suggestions when preparing this chapter, and to Rainer Bauböck, Christine Chwaszcza and the two editors for comments on an earlier version. The usual disclaimer applies.

ripening at more or less the same time and playing a similar role in our diet. Each is good to eat with cheese (but not with chalk), and we are often equivocal when having to choose between them. In other words, the distance between apples and pears is a lot more limited than that between chalk and cheese. In Sartori's (1970) terms, as we shall see later, you scarcely have to climb up the ladder of abstraction before you find a concept which embraces both apples and pears, whereas you have to climb almost to the very top of that ladder before you find a concept that is general enough to embrace both chalk and cheese.

In this chapter, I will focus on the crucial stage in the research process in which initial ideas and hypotheses are translated into an operational research design and into real research practice: the stage at which the concepts are defined. I will work mainly with Sartori's classic rules of concept formation, and with reference to his so-called ladder of abstraction. In brief, Sartori assigned concepts among three levels – high, medium and low – in which the degree of generality or abstraction of the concept is related to the range of cases which it covers. The more abstract the concept, the wider the range of cases; the more concrete the concept, the narrower the range of cases. This is fairly self-evident. What comes next is often less easily accepted, however, at least in research practice: when we move from a narrower to a wider range of cases, it follows that we have to make our concepts more abstract – we have to lighten them in order that they may travel farther. If we fail to do this, we run the risk of what Sartori calls 'concept stretching', that is, we end up stretching the original concept beyond sensible limits in order to accommodate or fit the new range of cases. Equally, when we wish to move from a more wide-ranging to a more limited comparison, it is often worthwhile to weigh our concepts more heavily and to concretize them more fully. By following Sartori's rules of concept formation, we therefore learn where we are standing on the ladder of abstraction, and when it is necessary to go up and when to go down.

Having outlined these various rules, I will then go on to offer examples from recent research in comparative politics of how concepts travel and of how they are sometimes stretched. From these examples we will learn that getting the concepts right is difficult, but also essential. Since Sartori's approach is sometimes difficult and demanding, we will also look at some of the alternatives, focusing in particular on Collier and Mahon's (1993) valuable adaptation of Wittgenstein's notions of family resemblance, as well as their discussion of so-called 'radial' concepts.[1]

## The 'what-is' question

The first point that Sartori makes is very clear: when we begin our research, we should always specify and define our concepts. For Sartori (1984: 74), a concept can be defined as 'the basic unit of thinking', such that 'we have a concept of A (or of A-ness) when we are able to distinguish A from whatever is not-A'. Sometimes we specify our concepts based on observations, which is when we deal with empirical concepts; sometimes we specify them on a more abstract basis, which is when we deal with theoretical concepts. Sartori instances 'structure' as an example of a theoretical concept in this sense (1984: 84), whereas 'legislature' would be an example of an empirical concept. Either way, however, whether empirical or theoretical, our concepts are always shaped and rendered meaningful by theory (see also Kratchowil, ch. 5).

As noted, we should begin our research by addressing the 'what-is' question; only later, if at all, do we address the 'how-much' question. That is, we need to know what we are going to measure and compare before we begin with the measurement and the comparison. This logic applies to both dependent and independent variables in any theoretical model. Building from the classic approach to qualitative analysis developed by Lazarsfeld and Barton (1951; see also below), Sartori (1970: 1038–40) argues that quantification, or measurement, or comparison, must come *after* the stage of concept formation, and hence that the logic of 'more-and-less' must come after that of 'either-or'.

For example, if a researcher wishes to account for the varying degrees of corporatism in the West European polities, a research theme that was particularly important in the late 1970s and 1980s, then she must first define what is understood by the term 'corporatism', which is the dependent variable here. If a more contemporary researcher wishes to explain the impact of varying levels of Europeanization in different policy sectors in Europe, then she must first make clear what is entailed by the concept of Europeanization, the independent variable here. If a researcher wishes to investigate the impact of Europeanization on corporatism and related forms of interest intermediation (as does Falkner 2000, for example), then she needs to have a clear conceptual understanding of both the dependent and the independent variables. In other words, the first task of any researcher is to specify the nature of the objects of their research, and hence to define the primary concepts with which she is concerned. This seems self-evident.

But although self-evident, it is not always easy in practice. One of the reasons that the debates on corporatism raged so fervently in the 1970s and 1980s was because scholars operated with different definitions and understandings of the

concept itself (Molina and Rhodes 2002); and one of the reasons why scholars today find such difficulty in agreeing about the impact of Europeanization is because they operate with very different versions of what it entails (Featherstone 2003). It is of course possible to proceed without a clear definition of the object of research, and hence to avoid seeking a clear initial answer to the question 'What is it that I am researching?'. But although this approach may avoid the difficulty of concept formation and definition at the beginning of the project, it can often lead to more acute problems being confronted during the course of the research, or even at the end. Moreover, the lack of a clear or even workable conceptual definition at the beginning of the project often makes it more difficult to explain to others what precisely the research involves. For this reason as well, it is best to begin by trying to answer the 'what-is' question, and this is also one of the main purposes of conceptualization.

Sometimes there are no easy answers, and no clear definitions seem possible, in the sense that there is not even a single specific property or attribute that can be incontestably associated with the concept (Gallie 1956; see also below). Sometimes, indeed, it is easier to say what the concept is not, rather than what it is. This is what Sartori (1970: 1042) refers to as 'negative identification', where the concept is defined by negation. It may be difficult to specify the nature of the Saudi Arabian regime, for example, but we do know that it is not a democracy.

Alternatively, if no precise definition is forthcoming, or if there is a conflict between alternative definitions, then a clearer sense of the meaning of the initial concept can be derived by asking: 'Of what is this an instance?'. Is the concept with the disputed definition a subcategory of a more clearly defined and more generally applicable concept? And if so, which one? For example, while the meaning and definition of Europeanization might be widely disputed, there are at least two broader concepts of which it is possibly an instance: 'globalization' (itself a disputed term), on the one hand, and 'nationalization', on the other. At the same time, there is a clear theoretical difference between regarding it as an instance or subcategory of globalization and regarding it as an instance of nationalization or state-building; for this reason the broader concept to which one is linking must also be chosen carefully and with a view to the theory with which one is working. Globalization usually refers to the dissolution of state and other boundaries across the world, whereas nationalization refers to the building of boundaries and the creation of new divides. In the one case, we can hope to understand what Europeanization entails by harking back to the literature and concepts dealing with empire or the pre-Westphalian order; in the other, we

need to look to the literature and concepts dealing with nation-building and state formation (compare, for example, Bartolini 2006 and Zielonka 2006).

To query whether the object of research, and hence the concept, is an instance of something else is in any case a useful step in developing an effective research strategy. It is also perhaps a more evident starting point for case studies than for case comparisons (see della Porta, ch. 11, and Vennesson, ch. 12). When comparing multiple cases, it is particularly important to know whether the object of study – say, corporatism – is the same or functionally equivalent across the different cases. In this sense, the 'what-is' question should clearly receive priority. In single-case studies, on the other hand, a better understanding can sometimes be achieved by focusing on the question 'Of what is this an instance?'. By querying whether the policy change she was researching was an instance of depoliticization, for example, Paola Mattei (2007) could bring useful fresh insights to bear on her study of welfare reforms in Italy and could frame her research in a fashion that connected to wider questions being addressed in Italy as well as further afield. In short, knowing what it is that one is researching, or knowing what it is an instance of, is a crucial first step in any research design. We begin by getting the concepts right.

But where do we get these concepts? In some cases, as Gerring (1999) outlines, we start with real-world phenomena, and then we seek to define these in more or less precise terms. For example, we might be taken with the notion of 'delegation', which is a phenomenon of increasing relevance in advanced post-industrial democracies (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002; Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2003), and then we try to specify what delegation is, what it is not, and how it fits within the wider understanding of new forms of governance. Alternatively, we might be drawn to a concept because of the frequency of its use in popular discourse, such as in the case of Tony Blair's notion of the 'Third Way' or his advocacy of 'joined-up government', and we might wish to explore the relevance of these ideas to contemporary political strategies and policy-making. A concept might also emerge from theoretical discussions, such as the concept of 'governance' itself (Peters 2000; Goetz 2008), and we might wish to specify its properties and explore its relationship with more traditional notions of government. This also applies to the process by which we seek to define a phenomenon as an instance of something else, since the higher-level category we choose can be drawn from a number of different alternatives. Sometimes, of course, these different sources may offer different versions of what appears to be the same concept, and this can be a source of confusion. In ethnographic research in particular (see Bray, ch. 15), but also in comparative social research more generally, it is therefore important to

distinguish between the observer/scholar's version of a concept and that of the actors who are being studied.

## Classes and comparisons

The second point emphasized by Sartori, which follows from this, but which is also more contested, is that 'more and less' comparisons should only be conducted within the same *classes* or categories: 'quantification enters the scene after, and only after, having formed the concept' (1970: 1038). In other words, the concept is defined and classified qualitatively, by language and theory, and quantification or measurement takes place within the terms of reference or class specified by the concept.

This is the principle of *per genus et differentiam*, whereby each object can be defined by its *genus* – the class of objects to which it belongs – and by its *differentiam* – the particular attributes that make it different from all the other objects in the same class. This mode of classification is known as a taxonomy. In practice, this means, for example, that we have to define what corporatism is before accounting for its development, just as we have to know what Europeanization is before trying to explain its impact. If I am writing a paper for a conference or a learned journal in which I discuss the recent research findings on Europeanization and then propose a new interpretation or set of findings myself, my concept of Europeanization has to be shared or at least accepted by my peers. Otherwise, they will simply claim that I am talking about something else entirely and disregard my paper.[2] That said – and I will come back to this later – the meanings do not need to be shared in their entirety, and indeed a lot of progress in research is made by refining and respecifying concepts that otherwise might not seem to prove contentious.

Classifications have two important characteristics (see Lazarsfeld and Barton 1951). First, each classification should be *exclusive*. That is, the same item or phenomenon cannot belong to more than one class. Second, the classification should be *exhaustive*. No one item or phenomenon can be left out of the classification on the grounds that it does not fit any of the classes. In a classification of forms of cabinet government in modern Europe, for example, we can make a distinction between majority single-party governments, majority coalition governments, minority single-party governments and minority coalitions. No one government can belong to more than one of these categories, in the sense that each is exclusive, and no government should fall outside the four categories, in the sense that together they offer an

exhaustive listing. If it were possible to find a government that matches none of these definitions, then an additional category would have to be created.

When two or more classifications are combined, whereby the categories move from being uni-dimensional to being two- or multidimensional, the result is a *typology* – and again, the same rules apply as with classifications: the types must be both exclusive and exhaustive. Each item must belong to only one type, and no item must be incapable of being included. Moreover, with typologies, as with classifications, it is essential to know the answer to the 'what-is' question; that is, it is necessary in any typology or classification to know to what the particular types and classes refer. Classes and types need labels. A very good example is the typology of democracies elaborated by Arend Lijphart almost forty years ago, a typology that he established by combining a classification of political cultures with a classification of forms of elite behaviour (Lijphart 1968). The labels were very clear in this instance: Lijphart was distinguishing types of democracy, and he was classifying forms of elite behaviour and forms of political culture. It should also be noted that in building typologies we are moving from simple classification towards explanation (see Héritier, ch. 4). Lijphart classifies both elite behaviour and political culture in order to establish his typology of democratic regimes, and in so doing he also advances an explanation for the differing types of regime that he examines. Following his reasoning, we can argue that consociational democracies differ from centrifugal democracies *because of* the different pattern of elite behaviour.[3]

But while the rules of classification and typologizing are generally accepted in the social sciences, Sartori's argument that one must only measure or compare *within* classes has often been contested or even ignored. For DeFelice (1980), for example, to paraphrase the title of his paper, this is 'common nonsense'. Citing Sartori's 1970 paper, as well as an earlier argument by Kalleberg (1966), DeFelice argues that this approach prescribes 'procedures that are in fact . . . dysfunctional for a general science of politics' (1980: 120), since they prevent universal or semi-universal comparisons. If like can only be compared with like, he argues, and if we can only measure differences of degree within specific classes or kinds – *per genus et differentiam* – then we are limited in the range of our comparisons. To follow these rules means that the political culture of non-democracies cannot be compared to that of democracies, for example, and hence the goals and progress of political science inquiry are unnecessarily curtailed. Jackman (1985: 167–9) voices a similar criticism. Even if objects differ from one another, he argues, they still can be compared, and this means that concept formation does not have to stand prior to measurement or comparison. Moreover, he views some concepts as being

**Table 10.1.** Sartori's ladder of abstraction

| Levels of abstraction | Major comparative scope and purpose | Logical properties of concept |
|---|---|---|
| *High-level categories* Universal conceptualizations | *Global theory*: Cross-area comparisons among heterogeneous contexts | Maximal extension, minimal intension |
| *Medium-level categories* General conceptualizations and taxonomies | *Middle-range theory*: Intra-area comparisons among relatively homogeneous contexts | Extension and intension in balance |
| *Low-level categories* Configurative conceptualizations | *Narrow-gauge theory*: Country-by-country analysis | Minimal extension, maximal intension |

*Source:* Sartori (1970: 1044).

'inherently continuous' and having no upper or lower boundaries, which means that they must be specified quantitatively rather than qualitatively. In these cases, we find out what we are researching by asking 'how much?' instead of 'what is?', and hence we deal with concepts that are defined in terms of 'more-and-less' rather than 'either-or'. As examples, he suggests concepts such as 'national wealth' or 'cultural pluralism'.

Neither criticism is very convincing. In DeFelice's case, to suggest that the range of comparison is narrowed by *per genus et differentiam* is to misunderstand the notion that these concepts stand in a hierarchical order, in which two different classes at one level become part of a single larger class at a higher level. Sartori elaborates on this notion quite precisely with reference to his 'ladder of abstraction', and we shall come to this shortly (see Table 10.1). For now, it is important to emphasize that comparison across classes – such as, for example, occurs when democracies are compared to non-democracies – is also perfectly possible within Sartori's approach, and can be effected simply by moving up the conceptual hierarchy to a more abstract and more widely encompassing category. Democracies may be compared with one another at a given level of abstraction; non-democracies may also be compared with one another at a given level of abstraction; and democracies may be compared to non-democracies once we invoke concepts that operate at a higher level of abstraction and that embrace both forms of government. One such concept is 'regime', of which both democracies and non-democracies are instances. DeFelice is correct when he argues that the range of comparison is narrowed at any given level of conceptual abstraction and classification, but not when

he suggests that the range is narrowed *per se*. On the contrary, more universal comparisons can always be effected by adopting a more abstract and inclusive notion that is higher up in the conceptual hierarchy.

Jackman's criticisms are also unconvincing. To say that some concepts are inherently continuous is to confuse the nature of the concept, on the one hand, with its measurement, on the other. 'National wealth' may have values that run from 0 to *N*, but it must also be a definable concept, for if we do not know what national wealth *is*, then it seems pointless to try to measure it. Jackman is also concerned that some concepts, so-called *umbrella concepts*, may be multidimensional. These are concepts 'that carry too much baggage to be reducible to a single unidimensional variable', and include examples such as political culture, democratic stability and political institutionalism (Jackman 1985: 169). But while each of these concepts certainly has a number of different attributes, it is not at all clear that they resist clear definition or specification. Indeed, if anything, to ask the 'what-is' question of any of these particular concepts, and hence to seek to situate them within a hierarchy of other categories and subcategories, is likely to reduce their inherent ambiguities. Is democratic stability a form of political stability that is democratic, or is it a form of democracy that is stable? Is political culture a subcategory of culture more generally defined, or is it simply an aggregate of individual-level political attitudes and political behaviour? To be sure, concepts are sometimes difficult to define and to specify, and there may be different dimensions that are difficult to untangle, but the research effort can be badly undermined if any attempt at definition and specification is written off from the beginning. Indeed, complex phenomena and so-called umbrella or multidimensional concepts are those that are especially in need of clear definitions, since it is often these concepts in particular that are the source of the greatest scholarly confusion.[4]

One such umbrella concept that has frequently been debated back and forth among scholars of social and electoral behaviour is that of 'cleavage'. In the analysis developed by Bartolini and Mair (1990: 212–49; see also Bartolini 2000: 15–24; Mair 2006), it has been argued that a cleavage has three distinct components, and that in this sense we are dealing with a multidimensional concept. The first of these elements is the social division that distinguishes among groups of citizens based on status, religion, ethnicity, and so on, and that lies at the basis of every cleavage. The second element is the sense of collective identity, with the groups on which the cleavage is based being conscious of their shared identity as Catholics, workers, farmers, or whatever. The third element is the organizational expression of the cleavage, which might be realized through a trade union, a church, a party or some other medium. Each of these three elements

is an essential component of what may be defined as a cleavage. Elsewhere in the literature, by contrast, the three different elements are sometimes used to define three different types of cleavage, such that scholars speak of separate and distinct 'political', 'social' and 'value' cleavages. In fact, this simply leads to conceptual confusion, for it is impossible to distinguish a so-called 'political cleavage' from a conventional political conflict or divide, and it is equally impossible to distinguish a so-called 'social cleavage' from the notion of social stratification. In neither case, then, is any added value offered by the concept of cleavage (see Bartolini and Mair 1990: 211–20). When the concept of cleavage is defined as referring to phenomena in which the three components of social reality, identity and organization are combined, on the other hand, we have a concept that relates to the fundamental divides that have shaped the parties and the party systems of contemporary Europe (see Lipset and Rokkan 1967). In this case, then, accepting the multidimensionality of the concept actually pins it down more precisely and helps to avoid confusion.

## The ladder of abstraction

Sartori's third key point deals with the ladder of abstraction, or what Collier and Mahon (1993) later referred to as the ladder of generality (Table 10.1). Concepts that are defined by a large number of properties, and which thereby have a more limited range of applications, are located towards the bottom of the ladder. Concepts that are defined by just one or two properties, and hence which are very abstract and have a very wide range of applications, are located at the top of the ladder. This also refers to the hierarchy of concepts and categories discussed above. Thus, for example, 'regime' is a more abstract category with fewer properties than either 'democracy' or 'non-democracy', and hence sits above (and thereby also embraces) the latter two concepts on the ladder of abstraction. One way of conceiving the differences between the upper and lower levels of the ladder of abstraction is to think of a concept as being like a hot-air balloon. If you want to be higher, and hence get a view of even greater swathes of countryside, you have to have a lighter basket – in conceptual terms, you throw out certain properties and become more abstract. If you want to be lower, and look more closely at something on the ground, you need a heavier basket and, by implication, you have more properties.

Most importantly, the ladder of abstraction can also be seen in matrix form, whereby there is a trade-off between the number of cases to be researched and the number of properties or attributes belonging to each case. The more cases,

the fewer the properties of each that can be looked at, and hence the more abstract the concept; the fewer cases, the more properties, and hence the more concrete the concept. Drawing from logic, Sartori uses the terms 'extension' and 'intension' to refer to these dimensions of the concept, and hence also to the matrix. The extension of a concept refers to the range of cases it covers, or its *denotation*; the intension of a concept refers to the number of attributes or properties that it has, or its *connotation*.

A good example of how the different levels (or rungs) on the ladder of abstraction function in practice is offered by the concept 'political party'. At the top of the ladder, and in its most abstract form, we get the minimal definition of party – that specified elsewhere by Sartori (1976: 63) – as 'any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections (free or unfree), candidates for public office'. This is about as minimal as one can get, and would thus embrace even the sketchiest parties in almost any conceivable polity, democratic or not. In other words, the definition is minimal, abstract – just one property or attribute – and with a hugely wide-ranging cross-national and cross-systemic application. It has a minimal intension and hence a maximal extension and is mainly employed to distinguish between political parties (groups that are engaged in nominating candidates for public office) and interest groups (which are not so engaged).[5] Further down the ladder, the definitions of the subcategories of party acquire more properties and apply less generally – they become more intensive and less extensive. Further down, for example, we find the mass party, a particular type or class of party characterized by a mass and relatively homogeneous membership, a hierarchic organization that continues to function between elections, a collective leadership that is accountable to the membership, and so on. This is a subcategory of the political party at the top of the ladder, but with a much more demanding definition and set of properties and hence with a much more limited application – for example, it might be suggested that this was a type of party that was relatively common only in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s (Scarrow 2000). Finally, towards the very bottom of the ladder we might find many more specific models of party, including, for example, what Hopkin and Paolucci (1999) have identified as the 'business firm model' of party, a particular type of party that was electorally unstable, politically incoherent, was intent on serving particularistic interests, and was observed through one example in Spain in the late 1970s and another in Italy in the 1990s. In other words, this is quite a heavily specified concept with limited application. It has quite a maximal intension and a relatively small extension.

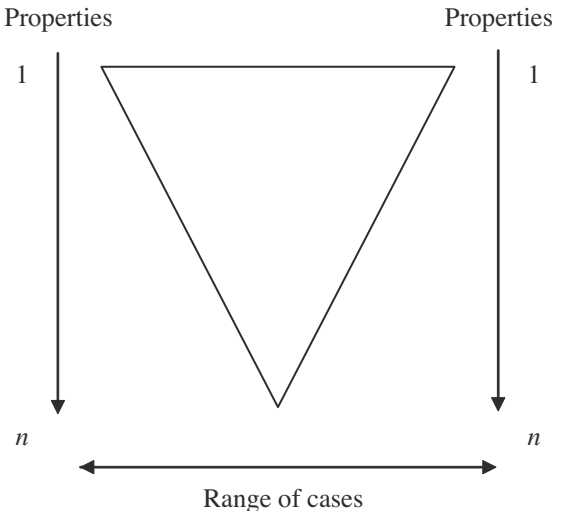


**Fig. 10.1** The trade-off between cases and properties

This trade-off between cases and properties can be conceived in terms of an inverted pyramid (see Figure 10.1), in which the range of cases, spanning left to right on the horizontal axis, progressively narrows as the number of properties (indicated on the vertical axis) grows. By the end, that is, at the apex of the inverted pyramid, there is going to be just one case and a maximum number of attributes; at the base of the inverted pyramid there is a host of cases, but just one or two attributes.

It is when we get away from the extremes, however, and when we work in the middle layers, that we find the most interesting concepts – in both the empirical and theoretical sense. At the top of the ladder, where the concept enjoys just a minimal definition, and where extension is maximized, there is not much that can be said beyond what is intended to delimit the scope of inquiry in theoretical terms. At the bottom of the ladder, where intension is at its maximum and the extension is relatively limited, discussion and analysis can often prove descriptive and quite atheoretical, although work at this level can be important in identifying concepts that can later be 'lightened' and hence applied more widely. At the middle level of the ladder, by contrast, where the concepts have a medium extension and a medium intension and can travel across a reasonably wide range of cases, theory-building and analysis in the social sciences is often at its most interesting and challenging (the *locus classicus* is Merton 1968).

One good example of the value of the middle level also comes from the literature on parties and concerns a discussion about the role of parties in the

then new post-Communist democracies. In a provocative essay looking back at the experience of the first decade of democracy in east central Europe, Philippe Schmitter (2001) argued that for a variety of reasons, political parties were largely incapable of performing their basic functions within these new democracies, and hence that they risked proving largely irrelevant to the future course of post-Communist politics. Political parties may have played a leading role in consolidating democracy in earlier waves of transition, he argued, 'but they will not necessarily do so in the present or the future' (Schmitter 2001: 72).

At one level, this argument was clearly untenable. As was argued elsewhere in the same volume (Bartolini and Mair 2001: 331), Schmitter was holding up to the light a particular definition of party – a concept of party – that was based on the classic mass party of the 1950s and 1960s, and showing how this sort of party was scarcely to be found in contemporary post-Communist politics. It was on this basis that he argued that parties were irrelevant. Against this, of course, came the obvious retort that while these sorts of mass parties were unlikely to prove relevant in post-Communist democratic consolidation, other sorts of parties might well play an important role, including parties that could be defined in less demanding terms. In other words, even if the traditional mass party discussed by Schmitter could be deemed irrelevant, other types of party should not be so easily dismissed. Indeed, taking Sartori's minimal definition as our guide, it can be argued that every democracy, new or old, will always contain some sorts of parties.

At another level, however, it was Schmitter's argument that was the more interesting. To stay at the very top of the ladder of abstraction and to conclude, on the basis of the minimal definition of party, that parties will always be present, is correct in itself, but it offers little of theoretical (as opposed to definitional) interest. To say that there will never be parties of the mass type, on the other hand, and to work within the middle range of the ladder, is to make an interesting theoretical argument about the conditions for the emergence and success of such parties, and their role as intermediaries in the contemporary political order. In this case, then, as is often true of analyses at the middle level, the questions that can be asked are more fruitful than those posed at the top or at the bottom of the ladder.

Finally, the ladder of abstraction is also relevant to the question of the multidimensionality of concepts, particularly insofar as this relates to work on the *history of concepts* and their changes of meaning over time (Hampsher-Monk, Tilmans and van Vree 1998; see also above). For Terence Ball (2002), for example, one of the most prominent political theorists working in this

field, one of the key differences between the work of empirical social scientists and that of political theorists like himself is that the former tend to treat concepts as if they have just one meaning whereas the latter treat concepts as having many meanings, depending on the time and place of their expression. If we follow Sartori's approach, however, it seems that there need be no serious problem here. That is, we can suggest that the same concept can have one meaning, when it is at the top of the ladder of abstraction, *and* many meanings, when we have climbed down that ladder of abstraction. The real question is not how many meanings there are, but rather knowing where on the ladder we stand.

Every concept must have a core or minimal definition, which is shared by all users of the concept. Otherwise, we end up with a situation which Ball defines as analogous to the Hobbesian state of nature, where 'each individual is a monad, radically disconnected from all other individuals insofar as each speaks, as it were, a private language of his own devising. Because the concepts comprising these individual languages cannot be translated or otherwise understood, each speaker is perforce a stranger and an enemy to every other' (Ball 2002: 24). But at the same time, this minimal definition can be expanded – the container can be filled with additional properties – and then different meanings are developed, each appropriate to a particular time and place. One very good example of this can be seen in the development of the meaning of the Dutch concept of *burgher*, or citizen, which has been transformed in a number of ways since it was first used in the sixteenth century (Tilmans 2004). In the case of *burgher*, there is both *one* meaning, which would be located at the top of the ladder of abstraction, and *many* meanings, the meanings that develop as we descend the ladder, add additional properties, and take account of the ways *burgher* has been given meaning by different people through the centuries. What must be avoided, however, is the notion that the concept can enjoy *any* meaning whatsoever. When we can have any meaning at all, then a concept can mean whatever anybody wants it to mean, and this is precisely when we enter the chaotic situation of which Ball warned.

Despite Ball's concerns, therefore, there is no necessary conflict between one meaning and many meanings. Every concept should have both, with either 'one' or 'many' being brought into play depending on where on the ladder of abstraction we are located. Rather, the conflict is between working with either 'one' or 'many' meanings, on the one hand, versus working with 'any' meaning, on the other. Moreover, unless we can agree on the 'one', core, or minimal – most abstract – meaning, then we can never properly appreciate why the 'many' meanings also arise, and we can also never properly compare

these many meanings with one another. Without first understanding what 'citizen', or 'nation' or 'state' or whatever means – the core meaning – we can never fully understand how and why one particular meaning of 'citizen', 'nation' or 'state' differs from yet another particular meaning. In other words, we must start with the 'one' meaning, at the top of the ladder of abstraction, and then climb down to the 'many' meanings, at the lower levels, and in particular contexts. And we must make sure not to fall off the ladder entirely and end up in a situation where 'any' meaning becomes acceptable.[6]

## Learning from the ladder of abstraction

Three lessons in particular can be drawn from Sartori's ladder of abstraction. First, as discussed above, comparison across classes can always be affected by going up the ladder of abstraction. Democracies can be compared to democracies at one level, and can then be compared to non-democracies within the terms of reference of a higher-level and hence more abstract concept such as regime. In this sense, the concerns of DeFelice (1980) and Jackman (1985) that comparison is hindered by the need for concept formation to come prior to quantification seem relatively groundless. The problem is solved by moving up the ladder (see also O'Kane 1993).

Second, concepts can be seen as 'data containers', which include a number of different attributes or properties. In presenting what is one of the most useful practical guides to concept formation, Gerring (1999: 357–8) suggests that concepts have three distinct aspects: (a) the events or phenomena that are to be defined, that is, the extension; (b) the properties or attributes that define these phenomena, that is, the intension; and (c) the label that covers both intension and extension. 'Concept formation is a triangular operation', he adds, and 'good concepts attain a proper alignment between *a*, *b* and *c*' (Gerring 1999: 358).[7] As the concept is changed, and made more abstract, the properties are reduced in number; as it is made more concrete, the number of properties increases. In both cases, of course, the label also needs to change. To move from the notion of the political party to the mass party and then on to the business firm model of party is therefore to add an ever greater number of attributes or properties.

In his extensive analysis of concepts and concept formation in the social sciences, Goertz (2006: 5–7) treats these properties as constituting the 'secondary level' of the concept, with the indicators chosen to measure the properties constituting the 'third level'. In the case of Hadenius' (1992) treatment of democracy, for example, which Goertz takes as one of his illustrations, 'democracy'

itself is what he calls the *basic level* concept – the core concept, as it were; the two properties of democracy that are identified at the *secondary level* are 'elections' and 'political freedoms'; and the various indicators or data sources at the *third level* which are then used to measure or operationalize these properties are 'suffrage', 'elected offices' and 'meaningful elections', on the one hand, and 'freedom of organization', 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom from coercion', on the other. This offers a very useful complement to Sartori's approach, since it emphasizes that we not only need to define concepts and identify their properties, but we also need to identify them in a way that will facilitate the selection of indicators that can be operationalized and measured.

Third, when we want to widen the range of application of a particular concept, it is necessary to make it more abstract, or lighter, by dropping one or more of its properties. This is a crucial lesson. Movement on the ladder is up and down rather than traversal. To take a concept that is applicable in a given range of cases and then extend it at the same level and *with the same properties* to a broader range of cases is to *stretch* the concept, and this is problematic. It is therefore advisable to make the concept more abstract by dropping particular properties or attributes and thereby to widen its scope. Concepts can travel, of course, and in comparative political and social research they must travel; but, like hot-air balloons, they need to be lightened before they can be moved very far.

## Other approaches to concept formation

Sartori's approach to concept formation has been described by Collier and Mahon (1993: 845) as the 'classical' approach, in which the relationship among concepts is seen 'in terms of a taxonomic hierarchy, with each category [or concept] having clear boundaries and defining properties shared by all members'. Collier and Mahon argue that not all concepts easily fit this approach, however. Sometimes it is difficult to establish precisely what is meant by a particular concept, or precisely what its properties are; and sometimes concepts do not appear to stand in a clear hierarchy to one another, particularly in terms of the ladder of abstraction, in that some concepts at a lower level of generality appear to have fewer properties than those at a higher level of generality. In other words, intension and extension do not always vary inversely.

In the case of the concept of 'democracy', for example, particularly given the variety of forms democracy has taken since the explosion of Third Wave

transitions in the 1990s, it is very difficult to establish a clear hierarchy of definitions and categories. Sartori's ladder of abstraction begins with a minimum definition, including the *necessary and sufficient* conditions that are employed to define the concept in question. But identifying this level in the case of 'democracy' is very problematic. If one says that democracy involves multiparty elections, and that this is the minimum definitional property as it was usually taken to be prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, then the category 'democracies' will also end up by including systems in which basic rights and freedoms are denied to many citizens. These are the so-called 'illiberal' or 'electoral' democracies that have been analysed by scholars such as Diamond, O'Donnell and Zakaria.[8] If, on the other hand, we define 'democracies' as being characterized by the guarantee of rights and freedoms, and disregard electoral processes because they are sometimes discredited, we miss a hugely important element in any democratic process: the right of voters to sack their governments. And finally, if we demand both criteria as a minimal condition for democracy and thereby begin to approximate to the dimensions of contestation and participation used by Dahl (1971) in developing his concept of *polyarchy*, then we end up with relatively few regimes that can be considered effective democracies or liberal democracies, and, moreover, we lose our hierarchy, since clearly 'electoral democracies' (defined as liberal democracies with inadequate guarantees for individual rights and freedoms) cannot be regarded as a subcategory of liberal democracy. In the definition of democracy, then, we struggle to find a working starting point.

One solution to this problem, proposed by Collier and Mahon (1993: 848–52), borrows from cognitive science and involves the adoption of so-called *radial categories*. This is, in fact, a very complex way of developing concepts and is not easy to adapt to real-world situations. In brief, radial categories begin with a single primary category, which is equivalent to an ideal type[9] in that it contains all possible defining attributes of the concept. In the case of democracy, which is one of the examples offered by Collier and Mahon, the primary category includes the main attributes associated with democracy in general, even though in practice not all might be found together in any real-world case: effective political participation, limitation on state power, and a commitment to emphasizing social and economic equality. Each of the series of secondary categories that are then applied to real-world cases takes a single core-defining feature of the primary (ideal-type) category, and combines it with one *or* other (or none) of the other possible attributes. Thus, if we regard effective political participation as a core-defining feature of democracy – as being necessary but not sufficient to define democracy – then the secondary real-world categories

are participatory democracy, which takes this element on its own; liberal democracy, which takes this element in combination with the limitation on state power; and popular democracy, which takes this element in combination with the pursuit of equality (Collier and Mahon 1993: 850).

An alternative solution to a somewhat different problem posed by the classical approach is Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance categories*, an approach that is borrowed from linguistic theory (Collier and Mahon 1993: 846–8) and that is intended to solve the problem of dealing with objects that are clearly linked or associated with one another, much as family members are linked genetically, but where none is characterized by *all* of the relevant set of attributes. In other words, there is no single core that is shared by each object, and hence they would not be part of the same class in Sartori's sense of the term. Let us assume, for example, that there are six cases, and a total of six attributes, that each of the cases has five of the attributes, and that no two cases have the same set of five. These cases can be compared, it seems, since they all appear to be part of the same family of cases, but they do not belong to the same class. The conceptual category that defined them, and that set the boundaries on what could or could not be included, would not have a 'necessary *and* sufficient' definition.

As Goertz (2006: 74–5) clearly shows, the family resemblance approach to concept formation turns Sartori's argument about the extension and intension of a concept on its head. Sartori's ladder of abstraction and his classical approach to concept formation relies explicitly on the necessary and sufficient condition, such that as the number of properties (the intension) increases – in a logical process of AND, AND, AND – the range of cases covered (the extension) necessarily declines (see Figure 10.1 above). In the case of family resemblances, on the other hand, the defining properties are 'necessary *or* sufficient', and hence the greater the number of properties – added in a logical process as OR, OR, OR – the greater is the range of cases.

In sum, to follow the family resemblance approach is to find that more attributes mean more cases rather than fewer cases, and hence that intension and extension vary together rather than inversely. The problem we then confront is establishing where this process should stop. From a comparative social science perspective, the end point is reached when we have both a universe of cases and a universe of properties, and hence when we have the complete elimination of variation. This clearly cannot work, and hence the conceptual boundaries have to be established at a much earlier stage. Since the number of cases we are observing serves to define the properties that are collectively shared by the cases, it is difficult to find a rule that works for inclusion and

exclusion. As in the film *Wedding Crashers*, anybody or anything can be claimed to have some family connection to those at the centre of the action, and hence boundaries, like wedding invitations, ultimately lose their utility.

## Conclusion

Some fifty years ago, W. B. Gallie (1956) famously introduced the notion of 'essentially contested concepts'. These were concepts whose operational meaning had been subject to continuous debate and dispute, and which would probably always remain without a firm and fast definition. Among the examples of such concepts proffered by Gallie were art, religion, science, democracy and social justice, while others have typically added power, law and leadership to that original list. What marks these concepts out is not that they have two or three competing meanings, but rather that they have one quite abstract meaning that is accepted by most users, while the application of this meaning is regularly contested. We all know what art is in the abstract, but we argue whether certain objects may be classified as art; we all know – more or less – what democracy is, but we disagree as to whether certain polities may be defined as democratic. Indeed, it might even be suggested that the reason the social sciences are marked by such a large number of these essentially contested concepts is because of their inherently normative character, with the application of terms such as justice and morality, or fairness, legitimacy, authority and terrorism, to real-world situations being inevitably subject to challenge and revision.[10] As Ball (2002: 21) has suggested, 'the history of political thought is in large part the history of conceptual contestation and change'.

But even when we accept that the particular application of a concept might be challenged, this does not mean that we should accept a free-for-all in which every scholar can use whatever definition she likes, and hence in which communication and cumulation fall by the wayside. We still need common ground if we work within a scholarly discipline – otherwise, quite literally, there is no scholarly discipline – and hence we also need to develop and justify coherent definitions of our concepts and to defend these definitions against potential challenges. As noted above, we always need to begin our research with the 'what-is' question, and we always need to be ready to defend our answer to that question against any alternative answer that might be proffered elsewhere in the discipline.

This should not be taken to mean that we have to offer concepts with immutable definitions, however, which would be the other extreme. Research

in practice requires more pragmatism and flexibility than that, and hence individual research projects will often tailor the meaning of a concept in order to improve operationalization and measurement. As Collier and Adcock (1999: 546) suggest, 'scholars should be cautious in claiming to have come up with a definitive interpretation of a concept's meaning. It is more productive to establish an interpretation that is justified at least in part by its suitability to their immediate research goals and to the specific research tradition within which they are working.' But, we can add, this should always operate within a reasonable range. To be too tight in one's definition may well put research-ability at risk; but to be too pragmatic and too flexible is to risk stretching the concept too far. Concepts also require a core meaning, and in extending that meaning for practical research purposes, or in qualifying it, the steps involved need to be carefully argued and specified. Meanings and applications may vary, but they must be explained and justified. This is where opinion ends and comparative social science begins.

## NOTES

1 The Collier and Mahon (1993) article is one of the first in a series of key publications discussing concepts and concept formation that have recently been published, including Collier and Levitsky (1997), Collier and Adcock (1999), Gerring (1999), Adcock (2005) and Goertz (2006). These offer a much more extensive and nuanced treatment of the themes discussed in this chapter.

2 This also relates to what Gunnar Sjöblom has identified as the 'cumulation' problem in political – and social – science: see Sjöblom (1977) and Anckar (1997).

3 For a very extensive and successful application of typological analysis to the variations in post-Communist regimes, see Møller (2007a).

4 This is clearly the case with the concept of political culture: see, for example, the assessment by Formisano (2001) as well as Keating (ch. 6).

5 This also means that groups that are incapable of placing candidates through elections – former parties that are now outlawed, or opposition groups in non-democratic regimes – should also not be considered as parties, but rather as 'groups', 'movements', or whatever.

6 As in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass:* ' "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." '

7 Gerring's argument here also carries an intriguing echo of Roland Barthes' (1972: 111–17) tri-dimensional treatment of semiology and myth, in which the signifier and the signified are combined through the sign (the concept). This particular echo is also relevant in another sense, since Barthes points out that while the sign can have many potential meanings, once tied to a particular signifier and signified its meaning becomes fixed. Similarly, once a concept is associated with a particular set of properties, its meaning becomes fixed and should not be stretched to refer to other meanings. At the same time, however, in different

contexts the signifier combines with a different signified and hence a sign which takes on a different meaning. See also Sartori (1984).

8 See Møller (2007b); see also the overview in Mair (2008).

9 On ideal types, see Goertz (2006: 82–8).

10 I am grateful to Rainer Bauböck for highlighting this argument.