Towards a critical ethnography of political concepts

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This special section approaches "politics" from a specifically ethnographic point of view. It does this by privileging ethnographically derived political concepts rather than more familiar preestablished and supposedly universal categories of political analysis. This introduction offers a general theoretical framework for doing this, and establishes a shared language of analysis. It situates current developments in relation to the history of political anthropology and of the broader discipline, and proposes a definition of the domain of political anthropology through an emphasis on politics as collective ethics. It then reflects on the relationship between language and concepts, and the articulation of different "global" hierarchies of value.

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In 2008, Bjørn Thomassen (2008: 263) pointed towards a "paradox" in current political anthropology: while the discipline as a whole had grown increasingly "political," political anthropology itself had "faded away," due to its "implicit refusal to define the political" as anything other than life itself (Candea 2011: 310; see also Curtis and Spencer 2012). Having set aside the excesses of an earlier, functionalist tradition, and eager to refute it, political anthropologists since the 2000s have tended to draw primarily on European political theory in their analyses (Marcus 2008: 61), understood to be more appropriate for the recognition of power relations on all levels, and for anthropology's own difficult position within them. The very categories that used to be at the heart of political anthropology were now seen as the tools or even the results of political domination leading to misrecognition (of power as "authority," for instance). However productive (and necessary), this shift ultimately resulted in a conceptual distancing of political anthropology from ethnography—from the ways in which people, the world over, conceive and carry out their political lives.

This shift in analytical vocabulary has had two effects. On the one hand, it has diminished the potential for political anthropology to contribute anything of substance to political philosophy. Despite calls for "cosmopolitan political thought" (Godrej 2011) and the growing dissatisfaction with uniquely text-based projects of comparative political theory (Jenco 2007: 744; Thomas 2010: 672), few political theorists today look to political anthropology for conceptual insights, even as they are drawn towards ethnography as a method (Schatz 2009; Longo and Zacka 2019; Simmons and Smith 2019). On the other hand, the confidence (or should we say arrogance) with which midcentury anthropologists dismissed Western political philosophy as Eurocentric folklore (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940: 4) has vanished. Today, political anthropologists are closer to the historical anthropologists of the 1960s (Cohn 1980), who treated ethnography as "reservoirs of raw fact" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 114) rather than the source of analytical insights. As a result, plenty of good ethnography stands alongside, or is improbably squeezed into, a (rather limited) set of analytical terms derived from Western folk models: state, liberalism, public sphere, civil society, governmentality, or whatever else.

Should this have been the case in any other domain, it would have caused outrage among anthropologists. There is something about the language of politics, however, that

makes it work differently. As Walter Gallie (1955) noted long ago, few political concepts are merely descriptive; most are also evaluative—think of "democracy," "dictatorship," "populism"—making any recognition of difference morally suspect. It is thus not surprising that, as sophisticated as anthropologists are at discerning cultural nuances in religious or economic processes, when it comes to politics, they often demote deep conceptual differences to qualifiers of global political institutions (local variants of the state, democracy, secularism, toleration), or else to a false exoticism that demeans our interlocutors in the face of putatively universal standards. The language of politics is in fact made to do double service: to speak of actually occurring political interactions on the ground, as and how they are defined locally; and as an analytical metalanguage to describe the power relations within which any field of action is by definition situated. This is not in itself problematic—anthropology, as a discipline, has long thrived on the scaling of concepts, and on the intentional blurring of the specific and the universal, while people in their local politics everywhere draw on different kinds of metalanguages. Yet these operations need to remain legible. When "politics" as understood ethnographically dissolves into politics as an overarching analytical stance, specificity is all too easily seen as obfuscation, as an obstacle to truth.

Here we plead in favor of the opposite approach: to take the inherently evaluative—and therefore ideological and ethnographically specific—dimensions of political language not as a shortcoming, but rather as privileged entry points into politics on all levels. We proceed from the premise that all political action is shaped by conceptual thought grounded in fundamental assumptions about the nature of social relations and moral order, and ideas about the world as it is and as it ought to be, and that this should be the starting point of analysis. That politics is, in other words, encompassed as much as it is encompassing, and that we need to hold these two aspects apart analytically even as we acknowledge and pursue their interdependence. This is not a way of evacuating the histories of struggle and oppression that make these assumptions what they are, of silencing dissenting voices, or of glossing over the differences and relations of domination they might mask on the ground. Rather, it is to claim that we cannot understand even the seemingly most straightforward history of political struggle unless we first pay due attention to the terms in which it is fought. Some of this is captured in a language of values, whose definition and prioritization Graeber (2013)

identified as the ultimate goal of political struggle everywhere. Here, we would like to broaden the scope of analysis to the basic assumptions from which these values derive, and to the terms in which they are debated, rejected, and transformed.

Our aim, then, is not to merely acknowledge practical political diversity but to understand the conceptual apparatuses and ethical assumptions that underpin it. This not so much in order to bring different assumptions into dialogue (thereby ultimately resolving their difference, as proposed by Dallmayr 2004), nor to state their irreducible or even "ontological" distinction (which we do not believe to exist; see also Sopranzetti, this special section). Rather, it is to contrast concepts across political traditions in an exercise of "reciprocal comparison" (Austin 2007), in order to mutually enrich and clarify them. Each article in this special section therefore focuses on one or a set of such concepts as they emerge from ethnographic research, and attempts elucidate them, comparatively and with regard to their broader historical and ethnographic context. These concepts are not necessarily geographically bounded, as it is in the nature of (political) language to travel, move and morph, and to be a nonrespecter of boundaries; and as few people even in "the West" live their political lives through the "universal" language of political sciences or philosophy. Nor are they "local" in any but a contingent sense, as political traditions answer to conceptual regional hierarchies which in turn impose their own universal aspirations or "substantially different cosmopolitan or transnational projects" (Li 2009: 426). Instead, the distinction is between currently dominant terms of analysis (whose universal applicability is all too often taken for granted), and those we are less familiar with (whose application in any other context than their own sounds decidedly odd). Paying more attention to the latter, we hope, will not only help us understand political life throughout the world in more appropriate terms, but also enrich and revise current political theory's limited range of analytical concepts. After all, as Chris Goto-Jones (2011: 88) concludes, "taking the rest of the world seriously might mean exploding current conceptions of political theory altogether." We can but try.

Babies and bathwaters

We are not the first to note and regret the conceptual paucity of current political anthropology (e.g., Spencer 1997; Marcus 2008; Thomassen 2008; Candea 2011),

but it might still be worth asking how and why it came to this. After all, politics and a budding political anthropology was at the heart of the postwar discipline, at least in the United Kingdom. Following the publication of Meyer Fortes and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's *African political systems* in 1940, "a work that, in a single blow, established modern political anthropology" (Lewellen 2003: 7), research on indigenous political ideas, processes and institutions flourished, preoccupying a whole generation of what came to be the founding fathers (more rarely mothers) of British anthropology.[1] And this is perhaps where it went wrong: political anthropology became too closely associated with structural functionalism and its classification of political systems in terms of their presumptive functions, a taxonomic obsession that Edward Leach famously derided as "butterfly collecting" (1961: 5)—unable, moreover, to see the imperial forest for the ethnographic trees.

Fixating on modeling and typologizing political "systems," political anthropology grew more and more mechanical and "anti-cultural . . . a micro-study of instrumental behaviour" that treated political action as "a source of social facts at their most thing-like," in the process growing so dull that it eventually "died of boredom" (Spencer 1997: 3, 5). Imperial connections, divergent opinions, internal dissent and dynamics of change had no place in this, and most political anthropologists of the postwar generation tended to dodge new political institutions that were all too plain to sight: courts, elections, bureaucrats, political parties, and rallies (Spencer 1997: 3). The Manchester School, despite its clear antiimperial stance and emphasis on process and dispute, did little to remedy this, mired, as it was for the most part, in the strongly empiricist assumptions of the extended case method (Kapferer 2005: 104). As such, political anthropology could not survive the postcolonial turn, having since been dismissed as at best naïve or (politically) in the wrong. And so, by the 1980s, there was no "political anthropology" left to speak of (Lewellen 2003: ix).

Political anthropology rose from the ashes a decade later, wary of past transgressions, and therefore doubly keen to adopt a resolutely "modern" outlook. "Modernity" was achieved by heeding Spencer's warning, and by turning away from "small-scale" societies and indigenous political institutions towards those exported

from Euro-America, centrally the nation-state. *Empirically*, this was a necessary move because most, if not all, of the so-called small-scale communities studied in the heyday of British structural functionalism were in fact nothing of the kind, but were part of larger, never entirely local, political orders (Asad 1973: 269). Nor were most of them isolated from state bureaucracies, however hostile relations with these may have been. It does not, however, follow *analytically* that all politics everywhere was now encased in the logic of Westphalian statehood, nor that it was not henceforth possible to study political life in terms other than those of "the state" and its satellite processes and institutions (international organizations, NGOs, civil society activism). Nor should we forget that many of the concepts that constitute "Western political theory" are themselves the result of long, entangled, and complex histories, and are therefore "Western" mostly in name.[2]

It was thus, paradoxically, calls for the analytical opening of anthropological theory—for its release from former certainties and its decolonization—and the expansion of the range of political anthropology's subject matter that ultimately generated a drastic closure in its theoretical vocabulary. This was by no means a necessary outcome of the postcolonial critique: kinship studies followed a similar trajectory at roughly the same time, but emerged all the more sensitive to local variation and vocabulary. Nor does a focus on nonstate concepts and institutions necessarily evacuate questions of power and domination. Yet if, to put it bluntly, by the

1. Developments in the United States and in France were somewhat different: see Lewellen (2003: 10) for an outline.

2. Anderson (1983) famously showed that the modern nation-state emerged in the Spanish colonies. Buck-Morss (2000) argues that the central tenets of Hegel's political philosophy were inspired by his initial sympathy for and sustained interest in the Haitian Revolution. The question of freedom and inequality was brought into European Enlightenment debate by Native American thinkers (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: chapter 2). Leibniz, in his late seventeenth-century musings on "enlightened despotism," was deeply influenced by Jesuit reports on China (Lach 1945). Centuries later, Palmer and Winiger (2019) propose a particularly Chinese trajectory for what they call "neosocialist governmentality." The list here is potentially endless; nor is there any reason, of course, to think of somebody like Machiavelli (who will be further discussed below) as an "Italian philosopher" any more than as a sixteenthcentury Mediterranean, closer in time and space to Ahmad al-Mansūr (see Scheele's contribution to this special collection) than to Thomas Hobbes.

1990s post-biological relatedness was seen a cultural achievement, the state and its acolytes still stood triumphant as markers of political maturity, or even of "modernity" itself (Jonsson 2018: 7).

This peculiar pattern of demise and rebirth might explain why, as Joel Robbins puts it in his contribution to this special section, the substantivist/formalist debate that had kick-started economic anthropology and that "continues in new guises" today (Hann 2018: 13) never happened in political anthropology.[3] In this debate, the "formalists" defined economic activity in terms borrowed from the academic discipline of economics (the market, capitalist production, self-maximizing interest), while the "substantivists" argued that its terms are set by a given society's norms, that the economy is socially "embedded." Whatever the outcome of this debate— the conclusion, mostly, that "all economies are mixed economies" (Hann 2015: 317)—it meant that all economic anthropologists became aware of the peculiar provenance of their analytical terms, particularly the historical extraction (or "disembedding," in Polanyi's terms) of "the economy" from otherwise social life in Euroamerica. Louis Dumont, who wrote at length about this process (1977), noted that "the political" was in fact segregated prior to "the economic" (1971: 32), but attempted no such genealogy. Nor, to our knowledge, has anybody else.[4] Economic anthropology was moreover fortunate to have had a founding text, Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (1923), and an apparently easily identifiable topic, "exchange"—

both comparable to and different from market transactions—from which to launch its substantivist challenge.[5] "Politics" or "the political" is nothing as cogent an idea as the market or even exchange, and there has never been clarity among scholars of politics, nor even explicit discussion, much less agreement on what politics actually is.

"Politics" is as hazy an idea in academic writings as it is in ordinary speech, where "political" can mean anything from things to do with power to matters of state institutions to being purposefully principled to being, conversely, unscrupulously instrumental. It is not a coincidence that contemporary political scientists, most of whom are "formalists," tend to fall back onto mathematical models developed by economists (rational choice theory, game theory) to define their subject matter. Political theorists, meanwhile, have long thought of politics as encompassing everything that a scholar of social life might see, hence posing problems of definition. Substantivist economists (to return to our comparative case) cast their net deliberately wide: economics is about how people provide for themselves or simply the way society meets their material needs. But what kind of needs, if any, does politics cater for? Functionalism quickly rises its ugly head; arguably, looking for political "needs" was precisely where Fortes and Evans-Pritchard went wrong in the 1940s. If older anthropologists tended to see in politics the answer to the universal "problem" of "social control" (Strathern 1985), today anthropologists think of it as the domain of "power," construed along similarly universal lines. Both answers are redolent of implicit philosophical assumptions (about human nature and striving, personhood, social life) whose presumption of universal validity is deeply problematic.

Power and what it disguises

Notwithstanding, by 2003 even a cautious introduction to the subject could conclude that "political anthropology . . . consists mainly in the study of the competition for power, and the way in which group goals are implemented by those possessing power" (Lewellen 2003: 85).

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3. If it did—perhaps during the Gluckmann/Bohannan debate in the 1960s about the applicability or otherwise of "Western" legal terminology in other contexts—it certainly did not have the same lasting impact on the discipline.

4. With the exception, perhaps, of Lefort (1986) and Mouffe (1993). In his (in)famous formulation of *The concept of the political* (*Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1932), Carl Schmitt attempted to do the exact opposite: he assumed that there always had been an autonomous political domain, and that it needed to be defended against recent developments, primarily that of the welfare state (or "liberalism" more generally). His ideas were highly influential, not least through the fascination they exerted, among others, on Hannah Arendt. All of these authors' reflections on "the political," however, are substantially different from ours, inasmuch as they are normative. We are, instead, calling for a closer ethnographic and historical attention to how and where the political might (or might not) be constituted as an autonomous domain, and what the implications of this are.

5. Perhaps the fate of political anthropology would have been different had Mauss produced a companion text on politics. But he did not, or not quite. Mauss's "La nation" ([1920] 1953–54) remained unfinished and the draft that does exist makes for dispiriting reading (Fournier 2004). For a somewhat more enthusiastic response, see Karsenti (2010).

Another popular textbook (Gledhill 1994) put it even more bluntly: political anthropology is concerned with *Power and its disguises*. This was a much-needed corrective at that time, curing anthropological naivety with regards to the broader geopolitical context of their research (and their own participation in it), as well as illusions of "happy natives" living in social harmony. It responded (partially, at least) to feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial critiques. Ultimately, however, its effect was both expansive and reductive.

It was expansive, because, following Foucault, power is "capillary": it is intrinsic to all social relations and is indeed what produces them.[6] Although Foucault in the course of his life's work arguably developed two distinctive notions of power—one all-encompassing, the other more narrowly concerned with matters of "government"—the two are intimately related, and indeed often merge, especially in the writings of others who draw on his work. As Wendy Brown points out, this leaves us, today, with the necessary work of "delineating anew" the distinction between power and political life: "theoretical politicization of any activity or relation is not the same as theorizing the political, just as the presence of power, *precisely because it is everywhere*, cannot be equated with the problem of how we do and ought to order collective life" (2005: 76). If power is everywhere, and political anthropology is primarily about power, then political anthropology dissolves into anthropology itself; from a subject matter, "politics" becomes an analytical approach, a methodology. As a result, the anthropology of almost anything can now be about "the politics of . . ." This risks making short shrift of local distinctions and political aspirations, potentially resulting in a clear "ethnographic deficit" (Candea 2011: 310).

Reductive, because if politics is primarily about power relations ("making people do things they otherwise would not have done" or even "structuring their possible field of action"), people's own political ambitions and projects (anything other than aspiring to power over others), and the meaning they ascribe to their actions, can easily appear as an illusion: as "false consciousness" or misrecognition generated by (symbolic) violence. In

other words, it risks neglecting the assumptions and principles according to which people order their own (political) lives, and the social value they might realize in the process (Graeber 2013: 227, following Turner 1984), however far-fetched and ideologically motivated these might appear to critical analysts. As a result, "an unresolved tension persists between attempts to trace and analyse power across varying scales and contexts, and attempts to ground description and analysis in the standpoint of others" (Samanani 2021: 285).[7]

This tension, however, is primarily of our own making. There clearly is no way in which we can understand the concepts, principles, and values that underpin the "standpoint of others" outside the complex histories of domination, but also of reciprocal engagement, mimicry, negotiation, refusal, and resistance that have produced them. No language, no "ontology" even, is innocent of both far-reaching and intimate power relations (Castoriadis 1988)—but neither can we understand those power relations unless we fully grasp what is at stake for those most concerned. "Power"—just like "politics"—itself is a concept that is necessarily ethnographically and historically situated (Archer and Souleles 2021: 198). While anthropological writing thrives on the scaling of concepts, productively blurring the dividing lines between "vernacular" and "metropolitan" concepts (Fassin 2017: 22–23), between "categories of practice" and "categories of analysis" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), these operations need to be spelled out clearly, and hence rendered potentially reversible (Curtis and Spencer 2012).

One way to do this is to make our skepticism bear not only on Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's functionalism, but also on the anti-philosophical stance that it implied. As noted above, Fortes and Evans-Pritchard famously rejected "Western political philosophy," dismissing it as "inductive," "concerned with how men *ought* to live and what form of government they *ought* to have, rather than with what *are* their political habits and institutions" (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940: 4, emphases in original). While rejecting their functionalism on the face of it, many political anthropologists have since followed this empirical stance: political anthropology is

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6. Foucault was by no means the only influential writer who popularized the term "power." Wolf (1990), for instance, proposes a fourfold distinction between different kinds of power. But Foucault's influence was such that it is virtually impossible today to invoke the word independent of its Foucauldian interpretation.

7. Ever since Sahlins (1993) first voiced his concern at "the current neo-functionalism of power," this observation has been made repeatedly, even ritually, if only as a way of sorting "culturalists" from "materialists" (see, e.g., Ortner 2016). One of our aims here is to show that this opposition is unhelpful.

about "is" ("power"), not "ought" ("its disguises")—while recognizing that "ought" might matter in other domains, such as "religion" or "ethics." Here we suggest a more sustained engagement with "ought" also in the political realm: we propose to supplement sensitivity to power relations with an understanding of politics as a form of ethics, as an evaluative process grounded in an understanding of the good life as necessarily collective. This understanding is always shaped by power—"the moral and ethical domain is a battlefield" (Fassin 2011: 484)—but it cannot be reduced to it; neither can in fact exist without the other. This would not only sit more easily with Aristotle's original conception of "politics," but it would also allow us to understand what constitutes and motivates political action ("the labor to live a good life," Simpson 2014: ix): to account for values and principles that orient political pursuits that remain otherwise unintelligible.

This requires a somewhat different approach to ethics than that which has recently gained traction in anthropology and which revolves, following the later Foucault this time, around the cultivation of virtuous selves (e.g., Lambek 2010; Laidlaw 2013; Pandian and Ali 2010). In Fassin's (2014: 432) words, this "ethical turn" describes an important and overdue shift from Kant to Aristotle as a main inspiration, but it neglects "consequentialism" (the term is Anscombe's 1958): pre-occupation with the social effects of individual action. In other words, it encourages anthropologists to take note of Aristotle's *Nichomachean ethics* but not his *Politics*, despite Aristotle's own insistence that the two be read together: that *Politics* is in fact a prelude to *Ethics*. This analytical scheme, which sets the individual self as the ethical telos (structurally, if not always empirically), reduces broader ethical schemes to the "context" or "audience" (Graeber 2013: 226) of personal striving. It also marginalizes all sensibilities where individuals do not feature as elemental evaluative units, as entities that precede social relations. Here collective life, social relations, and shared ideas are no longer the prerequisite to human flourishing, but are ancillary to the cultivation of virtuous selves. Unsurprisingly, such accounts often remain strikingly apolitical (Fassin 2014: 433).

Machiavelli's two books

The segregation of ethics from politics is frequently traced to the sixteenth-century thinker Niccolò Machiavelli, whose manual on government, *The prince*, is widely remembered as a treatise on politics as an anti-ethical, "Machiavellian" realpolitik. In his article in this special section Robbins too traces the "ontology of power and conflict" in contemporary social science to Machiavelli, and his exemption of rulers and the "interest of the state" from ordinary Christian ethics. Foucault, Robbins writes, extended this exemption to everybody, thereby making individual interest the chief ethical pursuit. With every man now a Machiavellian prince, an "ontology of power and conflict" becomes the only possible political telos. But, as a number of scholars have shown, Machiavelli never advocated the divorce of ethics from politics, and his contemporaries explicitly recognized him as a "moralist" (Benner 2009: 3). His writing, instead, was marked by a "strong Socratic element" (Benner 2009: 6): a tendency to expose competing moral arguments and then leave it to his readers to make up their minds. Among those ethical stances were Christian virtue ethics, with its emphasis on the cultivation and salvation of individual souls, and a collective ethics, which stemmed from antiquity (Berlin 1979: 45). It is only from the perspective of a self-centered and strangely disembedded Christian ethics (which Machiavelli clearly privately despised) that *The prince* appears perverse.

This ambivalence is reflected in Machiavelli's two major books: *The prince* and *Discourses on Livy*. In the latter, which is by far the more substantial of the two, Machiavelli described in detail what to him was the most promising model of state, namely the Roman Republic. The main concern of any political system, he wrote, ought to be how the elite's "natural" disposition (their "humor") to dominate others could be kept in check by "the people"; this could partly be done through a reliance on popular institutions, but at times required recourse to tyranny (McCormick 2015). In other words, if *The prince* was about how to rule, *Discourses* was about how to avoid being oppressed. The two books (and different voices within them) adopted two necessarily irreconcilable perspectives; "politics" was situated in the irreducible field of conflict between them. There has been much debate over the tensions between Machiavelli the advocate of tyranny and Machiavelli the republican (Pocock 1975; Skinner 2000), and, more recently, Machiavelli the radical democrat (McCormick 2011; Pedullà 2018), with an occasional reference to Machiavelli the proto-fascist (Femia 2004). Whatever the outcome of these debates, their very intractability brings into high relief two concerns that are ever-present in anything that we may think of as "politics." One is a concern with

directive action and the other with curbing its excess, through popular institutions and collective judgment, which are in turn necessary for *living together well*—and which any successful ruler has to take into account, and, indeed manipulate if he or she wishes to stay in power. One can never be reduced to the other, and both pose fundamentally ethical conundrums. Neither, moreover—as Machiavelli forcefully reminds us—can ever be consensual.

Pace Robbins, Machiavelli, then, in his insistence on the inherent superiority of collective over individual judgment (McCormick 2011: 76–77), in fact encourages us to move away from politics as conceived uniquely in terms of dyadic power relations, towards politics conceived of as collective action. We need to grasp both aspects—"embrace," as Lefort (2012: 109) argued Machiavelli challenges us to do, "several thoughts at once," and articulate the tensions between them. For this, our tools of analysis must be suitably diversified, combining, on the one hand, a form of critique addressed at unveiling power relations (which in much current anthropology corresponds to what we have earlier called "politics as a metalanguage"); on the other, an approach more closely inspired by genealogical modes of reasoning, a careful reconstruction of the categories of thought, principles and assumptions that bring institutions into existence and make it possible for them to evolve collectively (Owen 2002). As David Owen shows, such an approach is equally "critical" inasmuch as it frees us from "aspectival captivity," i.e., the assumption that any given "picture" or "perspective" on the world—the "system" that governs what counts as true or false—is the only one possible, or indeed appropriate to the situation at hand (see also Hage 2012: 287).

Tensions between these two forms of analysis have given rise to apparently intractable anthropological debates, which hinge not so much on the ethnographic evidence as on the relevant analytical frame. David Sneath (2018: 327), for instance, suggests that Malinowski's Trobriand ethnographies and Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* should both be read as accounts of aristocratic rather than egalitarian political orders. Analyses of Nuer gender relations had long come to similar conclusions (McKinnon 2000), while others point quite simply towards the large number of slaves in their ranks (Southall 1976), or to differential access to cattle (Burton 1981) to render assertions of egalitarianism not only naïve but quite simply unforgivable. They are right, of course, but this does not mean that we can simply dismiss both

authors' insistence that the Nuer and the Trobrianders themselves assert that they are equal—or at least, that the best of them ought to be so, and that Nuer political action and rhetoric has to take this into account. Any notion of equality always implies exclusion on some level, and what matters here is rather how "the people who count" (Sneath speaks, somewhat anachronistically, of "full citizens" [2018: 329]) are defined, and the basis on which the others (women, slaves, outsiders, clients, the chronically poor) are defined out (this was of course also the case in the European democratic archetype of classical Athens; Ismard 2015). In an older anthropological language, equality in such a setting is prescriptive rather than descriptive: exceptions are simply defined away.[8]

This does not mean that the voices of those who are "defined out" do not count; but rather that we need to understand precisely what they are deprived of, in their own terms, and how, and how this fits into broader assumptions about personhood and collective life. Answers to this are never just local and immediate, but require a close attention to regional connections and history. By the time Evans-Pritchard arrived, the Nuer had long lived in the periphery of two aggressive and expansionist empires, Ethiopia to the east (Johnson 1986) and Ottoman Egypt to the north (Sacks 1979), whose armies came to the region to hunt slaves who in turn would become soldiers who would come back to hunt more slaves. The neighboring Shilluk kingdom had been instrumental in facilitating slave raids (Mercer 1971), but also in procuring iron and other trade goods for the Nuer (Howell 1947). Nuer insistence on their own nobility and egalitarianism, their emphasis on martial virtues, their refusal of overall leadership, and their large-scale practice of slavery, was not directly produced by this, but needs to be understood, ethnographically and historically, in this context. Conversely, these values, practices and assumptions clearly informed the subsequent history of the region, including Nuer involvement in the many civil wars that have shaped their lives, much of which would otherwise be unintelligible (Jok and Hutchinson 1999).

In a similar fashion, a focus on particular political imaginaries might help us understand current political

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8. For the legal philosopher H. L. A. Hart ([1962] 1994: 187), this is indeed what sets moral rules aside from others: they might be endlessly broken without ever losing their validity.

processes that do not lend themselves to the exclusive analytical matrix of power struggle, to grasp why people may act politically in ways that appear to contradict their "interests" (for more on this term, see Chirițoiu, this special section). It helps to see why some of the American poor vote for the ultrarich like Donald Trump (Hochschild 2018), why white English voters might consider themselves an "ethnic group" suffering from discrimination (Evans 2012), why South African youths seek out dependence (Ferguson 2013), why women in the Middle East pursue what appears like their own oppression (Mahmood 2001), why Thai middle classes support the military (Sopranzetti, this special section), why dreams of new-found Ottoman glory draw crowds in Turkey (Bargu 2021), or why Indian citizens actively subordinate themselves to politicians (Piliavsky 2014).

Begriffsgeschichte

In this volume, we approach these underlying ideas through an analysis of political language. Language is our privileged entry into political concepts, not because politics is not also or perhaps primarily about actions, but because language and action are so closely bound up with each other that we cannot separate them. There is, in fact, no social reality independent of its vocabulary:

> The realities here are practices; and these cannot be identified in abstraction from the language we use to describe them, or invoke them, or carry them out . . . We can speak of mutual dependence if we like, but really what this points up is the artificiality of the distinction between social reality and the language of description of that social reality. The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is. (Taylor 1971: 24)

Or, from a historian's perspective, "language does not simply store experience that outlasts the specific situation: . . . particular languages delimit these experiences" (Koselleck 1989: 657). Linguistic anthropology has much to say on this, and recent formulations treat the adjective "conceptual" as a near-equivalent of "cultural," and society itself as a "perduring virtual communicative economy" (Silverstein 2004: 622). This has the great advantage of replacing a static with a dynamic concept, and showing just how much "beliefs and values" are always "at the risk of language use" and therefore "sites of struggle, contestation, domination, hegemony, etc." Yet this approach often privileges indexical over denotative content. Here, we aim to elucidate the complex relationship between both, by focusing not so much on a detailed analysis of particular linguistic encounters, but on the use and content of particular political concepts.

The relationship between concepts and language is never just one of straightforward equation. Words and concepts rarely align (Skinner 1989). People can entertain a concept without having a word for it (historians can thus trace back the emergence of "capitalism" without squabbling over etymology); different words can appertain to the same concept; one word might refer to several concepts (as with "politics" above); and people often use words that do not refer to any definite corresponding concept. The meaning and reference of a concept, moreover, need to be treated separately: to talk of badly disguised dictatorships as "democracy" because sham elections are held once in a while does not change the meaning of the concept of democracy, but extends its range of reference in a way that we can recognize as wrong. To reduce the concept of "democracy" in everyday speech to North Atlantic political systems does not change its current reference (although one could of course argue that it does), but profoundly restricts (and impoverishes) its meaning. In the same way, "the personal is political" is a powerful statement only as long as the meaning of "political" is held constant. Lastly, and perhaps most difficult to trace, the meaning and reference of a concept might remain stable, but its "appraisive force"—its moral valence—might change. Concepts might be edgy at times, and harmless at others.

Like language, concepts are never stable. One thing we can do, and historians have done successfully, is to trace the emergence of and changes in concepts, which often happen in periods of transition when these concepts become all the more visible. The literature on the emergence of the concept of "state" in sixteenth-century European political thought is a paradigmatic example here (see Scheele, this special section). This is often more difficult to do in contexts such as those that interest us here, where written sources might be scarcer on the ground, and where the unit of enquiry appears less obviously given than in Western European history (although there it is mostly an illusion also). However, it is noticeable that some concepts change more quickly than others; that some words, although proposed by the politically powerful, never quite catch on for reasons that might be extrinsic to their meaning; while others, apparently anodyne ones, start mobilizing people and ideologies

(see, e.g., Keeler, this special section); while others yet prove remarkably stable over time. The translation of European political terminology into Thai, described by Sopranzetti in his contribution to this special section, provides ample examples of all of the above scenarios. Koselleck, one of the founding figures of the German *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) project, put this down to the structural distance between language and events. "Semantics" and "events" are subject to different "rates of change": "language changes more slowly than does the chain of events that it helps to set in motion and that it seeks to comprehend" (Koselleck 1989: 660). Language thus never quite accounts for events; conversely, nothing happens that is not already changed by its linguistic interpretation (Koselleck 2006: 13). Add to this the various "games" people might play to legitimize their interpretation and appraisal of concepts (Sopranzetti, this special section), and it becomes clear that we can never just assume a one-to-one correspondence between events and concepts, no more than between concepts and words.

Third, we limit our analysis to *political* concepts. As noted above, the term itself is inherently problematic, and an attempted definition may fill up several volumes, without necessarily opening a fruitful discussion. More modestly, we follow two guiding principles. On the one hand, we are interested in putting Machiavelli's two books into dialogue: in how considerations of directive action articulate with visions of collective life. On the other, we propose to take the contested nature of "politics" as itself a productive entry point. "There are concepts which are essentially contested," wrote Walter Gallie in 1955, "concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users" (Gallie 1955: 169). This is so, he argues, not because we are confused, and greater clarity would end all dispute, but rather, because these concepts are appraisive: they refer to and evaluate ideas that are internally complex, variously describable, persistently vague, and inherently open. They are, as Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, "essentially incomplete" because "debate remains open about which the central, standard, and paradigmatic instances of the phenomenon are" (1973: 2). In its strong sense, this "essential contestability" is not merely a matter of historical or geographical variation, but of philosophical necessity: "its subject matter is in its nature such that there are always good reasons for disputing the propriety of any of its uses" (Gray 1977: 338), within as well as between different intellectual traditions.

Brimming with polemical possibility, such concepts are often at the forefront of political rhetoric and they mobilize lexical and conceptual sets. Political language defies translation in ways that indicate that it is expressive of basic notions that are complex, multivalent, and semantically capacious; ideas that people rarely agree on, but which form shared epistemic frames within which different political judgments, assertions, and disagreements can be voiced. These ideas are often expressed in words that have a labile semantic range (Skinner 1999) rather than one precise definition which can be catalogued in dictionaries or traced genealogically over time. In other words, while not all essentially contested concepts are political, most, if not all, concepts that have political purchase are essentially contested, in one way or another: they are politically potent or durable precisely because what matters is the point of contention they carry, not (just) the different meanings that people ascribe to them. Several articles in this collection address concepts of this kind: "democracy" in Burma (Keeler), "good governance" in Thailand (Sopranzetti), "respect" in Amazonia (Walker). This essential contestability of political concepts is, as Koselleck (1989) insisted, what differentiates them from the "categories" or "values" that anthropologists are more habituated to. We here suggest that this contestation is a fruitful starting point for ethnographic analysis—much as "conceptual change" is for historians.

Global hierarchies of value

We are not the first to propose that language may offer an excellent entry point into political relations. Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing subtitled their 2009 edited volume on *Words in motion* "Toward a global lexicon"; this is echoed, intentionally or not, in 2021 by Didier Fassin and Veena Das's *Words and worlds: A lexicon for dark times*. Nadia Tazi aimed to revitalize Raymond William's *Keywords* project from an equally global point of view, in her multivolume *Keywords: Towards a different kind of globalization* (2004–2005). In all three cases, the authors propose to take dominant concepts in contemporary social analysis and follow them as they travel the world. Tazi's series features volumes on experience, identity, truth, gender, and nature, with chapters in each on Africa, the United States, Europe, China, the Arab world, and India, opening up questions both with regards to the universal validity of the selected terms

and the geographic unit through which it is refracted. Gluck and Tsing are more multidirectional in their approach, as their aim is to show "how words—and worlds—are made in cosmopolitan and power-laden encounters at multiple scales" (Tsing 2009: 15). Still, most of the selected words originated in Western Europe or the United States. Similarly, Fassin and Das (2021: 6) offer geographically diverse perspectives on English-language terms that are central in current political debates, as a "a chance to refresh our perspective on the most serious issues of our time."

Our aim here is somewhat different. While focusing on politically potent words and concepts, we look for terms that are not part of standard academic writing, that are often difficult to translate, and that are rarely transferred, as models, to other parts of the world—or only disparagingly so. This does not necessarily imply that we are focusing on "local" terms. Political language everywhere is bound up with larger, regional traditions of thought that are neither internally coherent nor independent of each other. As Andrew March (2009: 437) observes, "in contrast to the boundaries between countries, societies [sic], or legal systems, the distinctions between thoughts, ideas, values, norms, arguments, and traditions are not always clear. Nor is it clear that the fact of boundaries or disparate origins is [their] most relevant feature." What is at stake, then, are not clearly identified and mutually incomprehensible bodies (sic) of thought, nor even "traditions" in Asad's sense ([1986] 2009), with their limited and agreed-upon set of valid sources of authority, but competing hierarchies of values (where "competition" implies not only opposition, but also interrelation, comprehension, and comparability). These hierarchies of values have no definable boundaries, as it is in the nature of hierarchies to attempt to absorb their opposites, and to pretend to have done so successfully; but they thrive on their own claims to universal validity and hence incommensurability, which might be empirically false but nonetheless rhetorically powerful.

Hence, when leading Thai politicians are attempting to control and slow down "lexical immigrants" into Thai political vocabulary, they acknowledge both the weight of universalist values as promoted by international institutions, and the moral traction of (empirically incoherent but nonetheless powerful) notions of "Thai traditional values"—even if, at the end, this means coining new terms derived from a different and much older hierarchy of value, that of "Sanskrit cosmopolitanism" (Pollock 1996; see Sopranzetti, this special section). "Ethnic" boundaries

here clearly emerge as the result of a project of rule. Similarly, the Arabic vocabulary through which much political life in northwest Africa is refracted can never be confined to any particular locality, but derives much of its salience from its inscription into a larger universalist language and its close association with Islam—which does not make it any less relevant in local settings, but rather more so (see Scheele, this special section). This is still the case today, and it is indeed why "global jihad" is so much more frightening to many external observers than, say, local uprisings clamoring for "Indigenous rights," although both invoke a universalizing political language.

These different hierarchies of value often have deep histories; they are not subsumed by states and indeed in most cases precede and exceed them. They can never be controlled precisely, and they only rarely overlap with "culture areas" as proposed by area studies. Mauss and Durkheim (1913) labeled them "civilizations" (a word which since has been put to much unsavory use) and noted that they are made up of different elements, some of which travel more readily and widely than others. Their boundaries of significance are thus historically situated, manifold, layered, and contested; they are internally porous and can accommodate exceptions (see Vitebsky, this special section); they are thoroughly political and a subject of inquiry in themselves, not mere background. The "cognitive regions" (Pollock 1998: 57) they describe are never morally homogeneous but are constituted of (shifting) centers of emulation as well as political and conceptual "backwaters," with areas of considerable overlap. Where economic historians have attempted to trace the shape of one or several economic world-systems, we should admit similar political connections and formations, not merely as precursors to current political imperialisms but as a historical reality in their own right. Sahlins (Graeber and Sahlins 2017: chapter 6, drawing on Cœdès 1968 and Tambiah 1977) hence wrote of "the cultural politics of core-periphery relations," operating through "galactic mimesis," as in southeast Asia, for instance, outlying polities copied the language and ritual of Indic kingdoms. "The effect is a multicultural order of intercultural relations in which no participating society is sui generis" (Sahlins in Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 345). This means that peripheral regions might have wholly "inappropriate" political superstructures, or at least ambitions, and that a purely "local" study of politics would be empirically and theoretically meaningless.

The aim of this collection is to acknowledge the interplay of such different "global hierarchies of value" (Herzfeld 2004, see also Sopranzetti, this special section) that are "global" not so much in their actual reach as in their aspiration. The reduction of the conceptual vocabulary in political anthropology that we deplored at the beginning of this introduction is part of these negotiations and competitions; it is a way of incorporating distinctive hierarchies of value within one moral frame, centered on international institutions, the universalizing language of the political science, and English-language diplomacy. While, given the moral overdetermination of all political language, this hierarchical incorporation might at times appear as a (necessary) compliment or as a rectification of past error, this is not always so, and it certainly cannot account for the variety of political lives led, in Euro-America no more than elsewhere (see Chirițoiu, this special section). The papers in this collection are an invitation to unpack these hierarchical incorporations, not in order to develop a more "neutral" or indeed a "global" lexicon, but in order to revert perspectives, to point out incongruencies or different possible avenues of thought, and to question the apparent coherence of current analytical vocabulary in the process. This is what we think an explicitly political anthropology can best contribute to the discipline as a whole, and to political thought—cosmopolitan, comparative, or simply contemporary—more generally.

Acknowledgments

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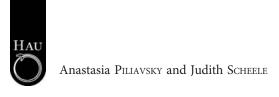———. 1998. "India in the vernacular millennium: Literary culture and polity, 1000–1500." *Daedalus* 127 (3): 41–74.

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