CHAPTER SIX

BEYOND SCIENTISM AND NATIVISM: OUR LANGUAGE, THEIR LANGUAGE AND THE BRIDGE OF EXPRESSIVISM
Before we try to use the Hegelian-Marxian conception of Civil Society-State relationship in the Indian context, we must remind ourselves of the multidimensional differences between the Western context and the Indian context. For that we need to first take into account the questioning of the Western claims to universality.

Seyla Benhabib says:

"...if what had hitherto been considered the major works of the western tradition are, almost uniformly the product of a specific group of individuals, namely propertied, white, European and North American males, how universal and representative is their message, how inclusive is their scope, and how unbiased their vision?"

But, before drawing attention to the provinciality of the Western intellectual tradition, a preliminary clarification is necessary. When it is said that a given view or perspective is 'Western', or 'male', what is possibly meant by that?

(a) It is likely that the scholar using these descriptions holds that our social attributes like gender, race give us some interests and our interests determine our perception of the social reality. If this is true of thinkers as well, then what a thinker has to say normatively and empirically about political issues will be systematically biased.
Another possibility is that the scholar believes that relations within and between societies are relations of domination and that the dominant views and analyses are complicitous with these relations.

In either case, a non-Western or a feminist response is expected to question the exclusions, the biases and the presumed impartiality of the theories in question.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* published in 1792, met with ‘scorn and derision’. It questioned assumptions about natural differences between men and women, challenged the marriage contract and argued for women’s political participation. The ideal of femininity and the burdens of household duties, the author claimed, prevented them from becoming citizens.

For David Held, the originality of Wollstonecraft’s ideas lay in her analysis of the connections between the public sphere and the private sphere: gender inequality keeps them out of public affairs and if they were to fully participate in politics, they would fulfill their private duties with enlarged mentality. As long as there is no comprehensive equality between men and women, Wollstonecraft argued, moral and rational order cannot emerge in society.
Jean Bethke Elshtain, in the Preface to her *Public Man, Private Woman*, says that she wants to voice "the discontents of society's silenced, ignored, abused, or invisible members". Showing that practically all the major Western thinkers have argued against, or qualified, female participation in politics, she says:

"The problem for women is not simply their exclusion from political participation but the terms under which their exclusion has occurred."

Elshtain points out that for Hegel family and Civil Society are the necessary supports of the State, but it is the State which gives them meaning and worth. Family is one of the ethical roots of the State, but the latter is an end immanent in family (and Civil Society).

Hegel's male individual leaves family for the sake of property and pursuit of related self-interests in Civil Society. There he achieves his distinct identity and, through his membership of the corporations he also has his share of the public life. Only men can become 'real and substantial' citizens while women must stay on in the familial domain.

Hegel finds justification for this arrangement in what he sees as the different temperaments and capacities of men and women. Men think conceptually, they are active towards the external world, whereas women are passive creatures of feeling.

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"It follows that man has his actual substantive life in the state, in learning, and so forth, as well as in labour and struggle with the external world and with himself so that it is only out of his diremption that he fights his way to self-subsistent unity with himself. Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family, and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind."

In this connection, Seyla Benhabib points out the following:

(a) It seems from Hegel's observations at various places in the Lectures on the Philosophy of History that he is aware that the differences between men and women are socially and culturally constituted, he sees them as part of the spirit of the people, and yet, in the Philosophy of Right, he naturalizes their differences.

(b) These natural differences are 'reasonable', presumably because they are functional to the social order regarded rational by Hegel, and therefore they are also 'ethically significant'. Hegel confers ontological status on (historically transient and stereotypically constructed) nature of men and women.

(c) Men are superior to women because they go through the process of unity - division - restored unity. It must be noted here that this is analogous to the unfolding of the Geist and thus the male participation in the economy and in the public affairs is sought to be
surreptitiously sanctified by Hegel through the use of analogy.

Elshtain cites from Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit the following passage: \(^{12}\)

"Womankind—the everlasting irony in the life of the community—changes by intrigue the universal purpose of government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of this or that specific individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the family."

This apprehension of female particularism and the anxiety to keep public life secure from it is in marked contrast with the educative role Hegel gives to competition and ruthless pursuit of self interest in Civil Society. \(^{13}\) The textual evidence given by Elshtain and Benhabib is indeed damning.

As we turn to Partha Chatterjee's discussion \(^{14}\) of community, Civil Society, and the State in Hegel and Marx we find a complex case made against the universalistic pretensions of Western theory. Chatterjee claims \(^{15}\) that European history can be seen as marked by perpetual unresolved tension, not between, civil society and the State, but between the narrative of community and the narrative of capital (by 'narrative', Chatterjee seems to suggest the constructedness of the respective relations), and that this tension surfaces in Western philosophy as the distinction and the erasure of the distinction between the State and Civil Society.

The narrative of capital in Hegel, Chatterjee argues, seeks
to suppress the narrative of community and produces Civil Society where ‘normal’ individuals engage in contractual relationships aimed at their respective ‘rational’ interests. But Hegel unwittingly calls this Civil Society ‘a universal family’ (Philosophy of Right, paragraph 239) — recall here that for Hegel, family is the moment of love and feeling of unity — and tries thereby to integrate it in the larger political community of the nation-state. The suppressed narrative of community thus reappears in a different guise, opening the way for violent, xenophobic nationalism intolerant of the differences within.16

Marx saw that the origin of capitalism involved separation of producers from their means of production and destruction of communities on which this separation is predicated. But he did not show enough appreciation of the strength of modern nationalism to ideologically bind the workers and capitalists in the community of nation with its rhetoric of duty and love.

The Western institutions of the State and Civil Society are implanted by colonial rule in the Third-World societies where the nationalists construct their communitarian identities in the cultural domain:

"The inner domain of culture is declared the sovereign territory of the nation to which the colonial state is not allowed entry, even as the other domain [the domain of the State and civil society] remains surrendered to the colonial power. The rhetoric here (Gandhi is a particularly good
example) is of the love, kinship, austerity, sacrifice. The attempt is ... to negotiate the terms through which people living in different contextually defined communities can coexist peacefully, productively, and creatively within large political units."

But this attempt is short lived. As the imperial powers formally withdraw from the Third-World, the post-colonial national-states, embedded within the narrative of capital, suppress the plurality of communities to produce 'the single, determinate, demographically enumerable' community called Nation. The return of the repressed is then witnessed in the form of violent nationalism.

The institutions of the modern State and Civil Society, Chatterjee argues, have been universalised by the global reach and dominance of capital. This has also universalised the European conceptions of, and theorising on, State-Civil Society.

Chatterjee believes that it is not possible for the modern Third-World intellectual to simply refuse to use these categories saying that they are bearers of the narrative of capital, or that they are bearers of the relations of domination between the West and the Third-World. To the extent they conceive of institutions which have been universalised (courtesy, colonialism), they are indispensable. What the Third-world intellectual must do is to show the Western theorisation as a not too successful attempt to suppress the narrative of community on behalf of
Chatterjee seems to believe that any attempts to fight the universality of European categories must proceed via an attempt to revitalise plurality of diverse communities against and outside the nation-state, challenging the sway of capital.

"It is clear, then: the struggle to provincialize European history becomes a struggle against universal history itself."

Fred Dallmayr echoes some of these criticisms in his recent study of Hegel. He acknowledges Hegel’s vulnerability on the following points:

1. Hegel regarded modernization — industrialization, advances of science and technology, collapse of the pre-given, ascriptive world of tradition — as the growth of rationality in human history and welcomed it. But when several decolonized countries are raising fundamental questions about development, we cannot accept ideas of progress and the onward march of Reason cheerfully any longer.

2. Hegel’s hierarchy of forms of life and forms of thought does not provide for reciprocal learning between the Western and the non-Western, the modern and the pre-modern modes of life, based as it is on the presumption of progress and the superiority of the former over the latter.
3. Hegel's allocation of different spheres and activities to men and women, Dallmayr argues, arises out of his metaphysical premises (e.g. the concept as differentiated unity, superiority of reflective thinking over feelings, etc.) and should be rejected. Apparently Dallmayr concedes that graduation to the rationality of public life must entail leaving behind the realm of emotional unity but, he says, in so doing we suffer a loss and an impoverishment and reason must 'ponder' over this loss and be mindful of it.23 (What this pondering amounts to is not very clear).

Thus Dallmayr, Elshtain, Benhabib, and Chatterjee successfully challenge the presumed universality of the Western (esp. the Hegelian-Marxian) reflections on Civil Society and the State.

These criticisms force us to enquire after the conditions under which the Hegelian-Marxian thinking on Civil Society can be appropriated outside the European universality.

If we want to use the term, 'Civil Society' for an analysis of Indian politics, that is, use it in a non-western context, what should we take it to mean? We can't follow Humpty-Dumpty's extreme nominalism ('when I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.') and hope to be taken seriously.24 Nor can we afford to be insensitive to the connotations of the 'original' usages. This is not a merely conceptual matter; terms acquire
connotations because of the history they are embedded in. Take Locke’s "civil society"; one of its principal resources (and I am only paraphrasing Charles Taylor here), is the medieval European view that society is to be identified in non-political terms. We live in two distinct societies at the same time, represented by the Church and the King respectively, with no clear hierarchy. The implication that the subjects’ subordination to the Sovereign is limited and conditional becomes pronounced in Locke’s postulation of a pre-political community governed by the Natural Law and enjoying a degree of prosperity. Now this Lockean concept of Civil Society has a complex background: the medieval view of society mentioned above; the ‘bi-focal’ Western Christendom (as Taylor calls it); the notion of quasi-contractual relations between the feudal lord and his vassal and the implicit idea of subjective rights we get from it; codification of these mutual obligations in positive law and their transformation into ‘natural’ rights; absolutism and its eventual collapse....

So when a Twentieth Century Western political scientist wants to use “civil society” in the Lockean sense, he, of course, abstracts from all this and what we get is something like the following: society has sources other than the State for its moral or spiritual values; it has a self-equilibrating mechanism of production; (though this is perhaps an anachronistic reading); and the State, or the government, is one among many organisations, though, an indispensable one.
What legitimates this abstraction is the fact that the Western political scientist and his Western audience have had the sort of history sketched above. They can tell themselves a story of the evolution of rights, of the trade wars, of the excesses of absolute monarchies and they can resolve to protect a domain of public life from what seems to them to be the ever-growing bureaucratic intrusions of the Welfare State that will swallow every initiative and difference; or if they belong to some East European Country like Poland, they can record with deep gratitude the role of the Church in keeping alive semblance of an alternative society outside the commanding will of the communist regime.

An Indian political scientist cannot use the term 'Civil Society', with nonchalance, say, in its Lockean sense, because this history is unavailable to him. Past can be interpreted, it cannot be willed into existence.

There is another point, partly already suggested, which needs to be clearly brought forth. When a contemporary theorist, say, David Held, or, John Keane, uses the term, his overall intellectual intention is to construct a democratic theory that steers clear of the New Right as well as Marxism-Leninism. The practice of socialism, he believes, has shown itself to be incapable of progressively realising individual autonomy and the abiding faith in market as an impersonal and efficient mechanism for co-ordinating and responding to the individuals' choices
overlooks the fact that it is structured by relations of power. So the work that the term "civil society" is doing here is that of articulating the 'third way' in the context of the Western perception of the collapse of the communist regimes, but also the chilling, sobering experience of late capitalism and the widely perceived need for a theory of democratic, egalitarian politics that does not repeat the mistakes of the earlier forms of emancipatory politics.

We can scarcely take from Held, or Keane, a definition of 'Civil Society' and expect it to work for a different politics without any contortions.

Some Indian scholars strongly believe that such contortions can be avoided by going native:

"The ideas embodied in a foreign language are properly understood only when we can express them in our own way. I plead for a genuine translation of foreign ideas into our native ideas before we accept or reject them. Let us... think in our own concepts." (Emphasis added).

I want to briefly examine the alternative suggested here that we use our ideas and concepts exclusively. The Indian Philosophical Quarterly special number, Svarai in Ideas, has several articles arguing along similar lines and I now want to take them up to see if we have a viable alternative here.

The special number has K.C. Bhattacharya's speech (delivered sometime during 1928-30) and other papers responding to his
speech or reflecting on the themes that he introduces there. 27 K.C.Bhattacharya’s case can be stated as follows (partly drawing upon Kelkar’s neat summary of it): Culture becomes conscious of itself in ideas and ideals which are partly institutionalised. Every society is, and ought to be, guided by the culture which has originated in its history. The educated Indians, however, have uncritically swallowed some of the Western ideas and this has resulted in ineffective, imitative, hybrid thinking among them. Indian ideas and ideals are allowed to drop and the Western ones bought without any contestation between the two. This has taken place without ‘our educated men’ noticing it. The British colonial presence in India and their policies have produced this infatuation and unless we own up our culture (before possibly modifying it through scrutiny), we will remain an unfree people.

Given the times in which this was said, there may not be anything particularly disputable about it. But in the process of saying these eminently reasonable things, Bhattacharya also speaks of ‘the soul of India’, ‘ideas that pulsate in the life and mind of the masses’ (note the use of the singular, ‘the mind’ here), our ‘indigenous nature’, our ‘traditional cast of ideas’, and so on. These expressions remain unexplained. In fact most of the emotionally appealing assertions are so vague as to be next to useless intellectually. 28 Bhattacharya welcomes critical, well thought out, acceptance of foreign ideas, or
a synthesis of the alien and the indigenous (whatever that means), and therefore he cannot be held guilty of chauvinism. But the Romantic notions of 'the genius of a community', the ideals of a community 'springing from its soil', idigeneity and alienness do nothing to strengthen the thesis of Svaraj in Ideas argumentatively. Most of the problems with Bhattacharya's case arise because of the two unargued for, undeveloped claims, claims which are not self-evidently entailed by each other: (a) we must hold our ideas and ideals reflectively, i.e., self-consciously, critically, we must be able to account for them; our dignity and freedom demand this; (b) we must use our ideas in thinking on various vital matters and strive to live by them, because they alone contain insights into our problems. (This is an attempt to synthesize Enlightenment rationalism and Romantic expressivism.)

A few questions arise. First, are we being exhorted to think in our own concepts because such nativism is always of some intrinsic value? or because of the colonial context in which such assertion has political use? Or is it being claimed that our intellectual tradition offers us resources to rebuild our social world that will be more humane, or more progressive, or whatever, than not only the one we are living in but also superior to the Western societies? Bhattacharya's speech is not very helpful on these points.
Second question is really a worry about the orientalist overtones of the expressions, 'indigenous', 'Indian Soul', 'our ancient culture', etc. Orientalising is a process whereby the West, in its imperialist phase, gathers elements from across time and space and constructs a stereotype of the supposedly essential, unchanging East. This unresisted representation acts dynamically in the Western hegemonic and exploitative contacts with the Asian and Middle-Eastern societies. Bhattacharya’s invocation of indigeneity, of assumed Indianness pure and singular, seems to be a mirror-image of the Western construction. Though he does not say that ‘we’ are a spiritual people, whereas ‘they’ are materialist, his essentialising terms push the thesis of Svaraj in Ideas in the supposedly enabling but still orientalist direction.

What is disquieting is that the other contributors to the discussion do not exactly redeem the thesis by being clearer than Bhattacharya. Most of them (with the exceptions of Rajendra Prasad, Arindam Chakravarty, and Ashok Kelkar) do not even raise the doubts being spelt out here. How to indisputably establish what our tradition is? How do we distinguish its ‘authentic’ appropriation (whatever that means) from ‘inauthentic’ ones? What is the method enabling us to leap across to our past? These questions remain unanswered.

We must free ourselves from the a priori insistence on ‘thinking in our own concepts’, and come to see the
terminological borrowings as a creative exercise. But we cannot utilise this relative independence from the original or from the supposedly indigenous unless we get over the fidelity-betrayal syndrome: fidelity, either to the original (believing in the universality of the theory) or to our tradition of thinking (out of the conviction that every people has a unique way of being in this world, or, more radically, that every community inhabits a distinct world, which is expressed in its language, its theories and its ideals). These two orientations take us to the designative and expressive theories of language to which I wish to turn now.

‘Designative’ and ‘Expressive’ are Charles Taylor’s words. He takes a historical review of various theories of language, various ways in which it has been understood.33 ‘Designative’ theories originated in the 17th century, the century of scientific revolution. Challenging the earlier views of the world as the embodiment of God’s thought, and therefore as expressing divine significance, these theories led the process of ‘disenchantment’ and came to view human language as the only source of meaning. And our words and sentences have meanings because they represent, or mirror, things and their relations for us. The well known Romantic rebellion against this instrumentalist view of language regarded us as expressive beings who come to be fully human in expressing themselves in and through language or language-like media.
But if language is understood as (1) originating and developing in speech community, (2) through unconscious contributions from individual speakers who, in introducing a new meaning, alter a whole range of meanings, because (3) language is this web of interconnected lexicon (4) constituting individual members’ being in the world and their interrelationships that make the speech community, then language must be understood as a facilitating as well as a constraining factor in our practical concern to know and reshape our common social world. This is how Taylor develops the ‘expressive’ thesis of language.

Returning briefly to the discussion of the last section: We can borrow and make use of other’s ideas if we get over the anxiety about fidelity—either to the original theory or to our tradition. In the first case, we are anxious because we treat the given theory as pointing to an objective state of affairs and therefore as universal in validity. Here we are subscribing to a designative theory of language. In the other case we want to be faithful to our indigenous way of thinking due to the unarticulated Romantic ideas of tradition and community.

Now, if we take some sort of a non-designative view of language (as I propose to), then we no longer need to worry about using terms in their original sense because what we are trying to get at in talking about Civil Society, or
Civil Society in India, is not some objectively existing state of affairs that can be pointed at without getting caught in the various ways of talking about them. But if we take language to be a medium sustaining our sociality (and in turn sustained by it) then we can also free ourselves from the notion of the genius of every community expressed in its ideas. For, the view of language as constituting us and being constituted by us is only a further development of the original, highly problematic Romantic paradigm. (This applies even to the hermeneutically supported defences of indigeneity). But there are different ways of explicating and developing this non-designative view of language I am favoring and the next few sections will present those efforts.

1. Charles Taylor: Social Theory, Practice, and Interpretation
The main thesis of interpretative social science is that "an adequate account of human action must make the agents more understandable". It is not enough for social theory to aim at prediction, it must also try 'to make sense' of the agents. Taylor proposes a variant of this thesis when he says that "social theory has to take subjects as agents of self-definition, whose practice is shaped by their understanding". 34

To amplify: to speak of men and women as agents is to see that they have purposes, desires, aspirations; that they act with these 'subjective factors', that, therefore, their
actions carry some significance for them; that this significance is in principle communicable, and actually communicated, in however inarticulate manner; and that the imperfect or partial sharing of self-definitions in collective practices is a source of deep social divisions.

Charles Taylor’s invocation of the interpretative dimension of social life was preceded by Alasdair MacIntyre’s trenchant criticism of the behavioural persuasion much in vogue then among political scientists. Asserting that institutions and practices are always partly constituted by people’s orientations towards them, he says:

“This fact is ignored in general by those who wish to define political science as the study of political behaviour, with a view to thereby providing a public, neutral subject matter for scientific enquiry. But if we identify behaviour except in terms of the intentions... of the agents we shall risk describing what they are doing as what we would be doing if we went through that series of movements or something like it rather than what they are actually doing”.

Taylor argues that the relation of theory to practice in social science is different from what obtains in natural science. A natural scientific theory is a proposed way of explaining the world around and of intervening in it successfully, ’to effect our purposes’. A true theory here enables us to cope with our natural surroundings. A society, unlike nature, is made up of practices. These practices are partly constituted by the significance or
descriptions attached to them by those who participate in them. 36

Now these descriptions, as pointed out earlier, are not always articulate or coherent. One of the occasions for social theory arises when we try to state explicitly and coherently what is perhaps only implicit in the self-descriptions of the agents. Social theory also extends, criticises or challenges our constitutive understandings. It may 'bring to light a moral context to which we are allegedly blind'. 37

Our characterisation of what we are doing in, for example, raising a hand, or less abstractly put, voting for a motion, is a crucial part of our practice of arriving at decisions by majority vote. 38 Therefore, when a theory clarifies or, say, challenges this understanding, it must affect in some way the said practice. In natural science, the object of theory is independent of theory and with a change in our understanding of how nature works, what alters is our way of coping with it. Whereas an effective social theory modifies or replaces our practice-constituting understanding and thereby affects the practice. 39

Explaining the idea of self-descriptions, Taylor says:

"That the practice of negotiation allows us to distinguish bargaining in good or bad faith, or entering into or breaking-off negotiations, presupposes that our acts and situations have a
certain description for us, for example, that we are distinct parties entering into willed relations. But they cannot have these descriptions for us unless this is somehow expressed in our vocabulary of this practice....

The vocabulary of negotiation could not make sense if the practice of negotiation did not exist, and the range of practices called negotiation could not exist without the prevalence of this vocabulary. Taylor points out that when individuals or parties negotiate, they do not negotiate the ideas and norms that constitute 'negotiation' itself. But these ideas and norms must be already the common property of their society before anyone can actually enter into negotiations.

Perhaps it is necessary here to clarify what Taylor is not saying: to say that it is a task of social theory to make sense of the agents' actions and that one must look at their self-understandings in order to do that does not mean that (1) we assume the act to have some rationality or justification; that (2) we assume that the agent is fully clear about the import of the act; or that (3) the significance he attaches to the practice is shared by all. Agents may be, and often are, unclear, incoherent, contradictory, and theory may criticize their self-understandings partly by bringing to light these inadequacies. To say that the practice, say, of negotiations cannot exist without inter-subjective meanings regarding negotiations is not to say that there is a
consensus over the norms of negotiating. Often there isn’t. Understanding and agreements are partial and cleavages deep.

What is important about Taylor’s thesis is that it grounds interpretative social science in, what he calls, ‘expressivist’ theory of language. According to this theory, language, as mentioned in the earlier section, is expressive of our way of being in the world. But it precedes us and transcends this or that agent’s expressive use of it. And yet since language is always the language of a community, what we express in and through it is necessarily shared or shareable (however partially and imperfectly) making it possible for us to arrive at a communally held notion of good life.

This expressivist turn takes interpretative social science beyond the debate of recovery vs. suspicion. The hermeneutics of recovery assumes internal coherence in the ideas, intentions, and actions of agents and their practices. It sets itself the goal of bringing out this coherence and of making sense of the self-understandings in terms of the overall relational and institutional context in which they act. Explanation here is explanation largely in terms of the participants’ self-understanding and there is no hiatus or tension between the appearance and the reality of social life.
Hermeneutics of suspicion locates itself precisely in this hiatus: the meaning agents attach to their practices is not constitutive of those practices, rather, it clouds their perception by hiding from them the true significance of the practices. It is this allegedly true significance that the hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to uncover. And 'uncover' is the key term here just as 'recovery' is in the other kind of hermeneutics.

Taylor's formulation helps us get out of this polarised situation. Not just because it does not assume coherence, transparency, and so on. His expressivist conception of language entails that social theory, in articulating implicit, inter-subjective meanings, forms them. In this respect it is not fundamentally different from the linguistic expressions of the agents themselves articulating their self-understanding. But it does the same thing - in a more public, self-aware, and systematic way.

That language, or anything like language, is the medium of our self-formative process - process, which is necessarily open-ended and continuous - means that interpretative social theory grounded in this conception of language recovers the meanings and also contributes to their production through elaboration, clarification, criticism, and so on. Social theory thus operates in a field full of contestation, incompleteness, and opacity. It has no privileged plane, epistemologically or methodologically secured, on which it
can operate without getting entangled with our social life and its varied, conflicting significations. What it can claim to be providing is a less dogmatic (because more self-reflexive), more coherent and thought-through signification than the 'commonsensical' or 'ideological' ones that it brings out, engages with and builds upon.

2. William Connolly: Essentially Contested Concepts

According to the suggestions originally made by W.B. Gallie (1956) and taken up by William Connolly, scholars as well as ordinary people in their political life, use concepts the meaning of which is partly shared and partly disputed. For example, they will agree that political equality of citizens and accountability of the government to citizens are indispensable to any democratic governance. But they might disagree as to the relative importance of these as against some other criteria; "political equality" and "accountability" will be construed differently; and, as a result, a certain law or a practice will be regarded as undemocratic by some whereas others will not see anything objectionable about it. These disagreements do not result from different readings of the available evidence alone. The conceptual disputes arise because of the irreducibly complex and normative character of the concepts routinely used in political life.46

By complexity of concepts Connolly means their
multi-dimensionality. Consider the concept of 'development'. It is ordinarily taken to mean higher literacy, lower mortality rate, rise in per capita income, greater GNP, rationalisation of public administration, participatory political culture, and host of other things. If we find social scientists, bureaucrats, political leaders and 'ordinary' people using the concept, not all of them mean the same set of things by it. Different users delimit the concept to different clusters and even among those agreed on the criteria of development, differences persist over the weight to be given to, say, poverty alleviation, compared to, say, increased agrarian consumption of inorganic fertilizers.

The second major source of conceptual dispute is the appraisive character of most political concepts. 47 Criticising the scientistic dichotomies of fact and value, analytic statements and synthetic statements, descriptive concepts and normative concepts, Connolly points out that description of an act, situation, or practice, is never neutral and detached but always from a perspective and that utility, prudence, or morality structure our descriptions.

"To describe persons or situations as awesome, fearful, dangerous, menacing, or risky is typically to call attention to features...potentially harmful to participants...." "...[T]o say that someone has lied, promised, threatened, or murdered, or has acted violently, courageously, cowardly, rudely, or is innocent, negligent, corrupt is to describe a variety of acts, practices, and dispositions from a moral point of view". 48
We can appreciate Connolly’s argument if we look at some of the concepts currently used in the public life of our country. Consider, “secular”, “communal”, “appeasement”, “excesses”, “human rights abuses”, etc. Firstly, these are ways of characterising situations, acts, etc., and not some value-neutral short-hands for empirical states of affairs. Secondly, something about their meanings is shared by most of the participants in political discourse otherwise, we as a people just would not have a language for discussing common issues, a language constituted by these terms. Thirdly, we share this language but the sharing is incomplete because we often notice that people using the same concept are actually speaking at cross purposes.

We all agree that secularism and communalism are antithetical terms (and practices), that historically we have resolved to be a secular nation, that this means that the Indian State will observe ‘an attitude of impartiality and neutrality’ towards all religions, that every citizen has a fundamental right to practise and propagate any religion, and so on. But there are several matters over which we violently disagree: does it amount to an appeasement of a religious minority to declare the birthday of their Prophet a public holiday? or to ban a book on the ground that it hurts religious sentiments of a religious group? Is the use of the symbol of lotus for electoral purposes use of a cultural symbol or misuse of religion?
In some cases, the disagreement over the application of a term, like ‘encounter’, for example, turns on disputed facts about the events. Were the militants armed when they were killed by the police? Were they given a chance to surrender? Who started firing? And so on. But there are other matters where differences are of views and opinions and these go quite deep. Is the State obliged to respect civil rights of armed political groups using violent means? Should courts intervene in an on-going police or military operation in the name of protecting the extremists’ right to life? These are disputes of a normative sort involving concepts of democratic politics, civil rights, due process of law, and the State’s obligation to keep within the confines of civility, decency, and legality even when it is dealing with groups allegedly disrespectful towards these values.

We characterise the ‘same’ object or state differently, and therefore we have contentious concepts. These concepts change their meanings or fall in disuse as a result of intellectual scrutiny or altered circumstances.

William Connolly quotes Peter Winch in the course of the presentation of his thesis of essentially contested concepts:

“...[I]t does not make sense to suppose that human beings might have been issuing commands and beingsthem before they came to form concepts of command and obedience...."
We might pause here and ask whether modern India is in principle incapable of a certain significant ordering of its political and economic practices because its public discussions seem to lack the concept of Civil Society.

But a society can have a conception of something without having a term for it. It is true of course that once a term comes to be used, the thinking achieves greater clarity and fixity along different dimensions. Connolly himself gives the example of the word ‘boycott’. One Mr. Boycott, a land agent for some English landlords in the 19th century, was socially isolated by the Irish peasants for the high rent he used to charge and the ruthless manner in which he used to collect it. This led to the coining of the word ‘boycotting’ and the availability of it made it possible for the 20th century Western societies to use it in politics in various ways or to challenge its use. Connolly remarks:

"When the participants with such an idea use one word (or phrase) to capture it, the idea itself is likely to become more sharply defined and widely understood: it becomes more convenient to plan mass strategies with or around the shared idea...."

Several disputes and distinctions evolve around the term and there politics flourishes. For these distinctions are attempts to characterise practices in different ways: whether something can be construed as a boycott or ostracising or non-cooperation and so on. The social scientist's act of drawing distinctions, providing defence
for some practices so identified etc., is a political act.

"To the extent that the investigator stakes out a position on these conceptual contests...he can be said to participate in...politics itself. For these contests over the correct use of partly shared appraisal concepts are themselves an intrinsic part of politics".50

Concepts, or terms, are linked to other concepts and together they form a network.51 Often the dispute is between or through competing networks. And since a more or less complete network is a vision of preferred social order and a view of good life, we can be said to be disputing, however opaquely, each others' proposals for a common world. These conflicts cannot be fully resolved rationally, i.e., using logic, evidence, or both. Political life, then, is a spectacle of reason, rhetoric, strategic communication, compromise and, of course, coercion. The thesis of essentially contested concepts keeps us aware of the role of our ideas and their limits.

3. Quentin Skinner: Interpretation, Intention, and Discourse

Speech and action seem to be clearly distinct from one another and yet we know intuitively that sometimes saying something is doing something. It's not that we say something and then the doing follows; rather, in some cases, we do something in or through saying something. J.L. Austin tried to grasp this by classifying utterances as descriptive and performative.52 We observed that in our ordinary linguistic practice there are many utterances which do not
merely report or state and which therefore cannot be simply true or false. If I say: I hereby declare this exhibition open, then, this utterance is not true or false. The appropriate characterisation here would be 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous'. If there is indeed an exhibition to be opened and if the organisers have requested me to declare it open, then, at an appropriate ceremony, my issuing the above utterance is felicitous. Should any of these crucial conditions fail to obtain, we will have to say that my utterance was 'infelicitous'.

Performative utterances are those through which the speaker does something: naming, inaugurating, marrying, etc. Whether such an utterance has been "appropriate", "happy", "felicitous", "successful" or not depends on the relevant social conventions governing the issuing of those utterances.

But an utterance like, "A train is coming!", is both a description and a warning, or alerting, or, may be, urging. To state or to inform is to act too because it is an intentional behaviour in a specific situation oriented towards the other. Thus the distinction between descriptive utterances and performative utterances collapses.

Austin tried to get round this difficulty by suggesting that the same utterance may be said to have three different aspects or may be seen as performing three different acts.
simultaneously. For example, in saying, "the door is open", (1) I am using an utterance with a definite sense and reference, (2) hinting, stating, exclaiming, or, cautioning, and, (3) say, trying to get you to shut the door, or, speak softly.

Quentin Skinner believes that Austin's account of linguistic action can be used to interpret the past political (theoretic) texts by establishing a specific sense of "meaning". To understand a text is to understand it as a linguistic act; and to understand it as a linguistic act is "to gain uptake" of the illocutionary force of the utterance. To put it colloquially, one is trying to find out here what the point of the utterance was. To ask about the meaning is to ask what the agent's primary intention was in performing that linguistic action. (It is of course not assumed here that there is a correspondence between single intentions and single linguistic actions. Skinner speaks of primary intention).

To illustrate: take Machiavelli's The Prince. Everyone who has studied Western political thought knows about Machiavelli's somewhat shocking assertion that 'princes must learn when not to be virtuous'. To understand this remark it is not enough to know the plain meaning of the words and their grammatical relations. We must know what the illocutionary force of the utterance is, what the author was intending to achieve by saying this. Skinner says that a
historian of ideas must find out whether in the tradition of
advice-books written for princes, authors used to commend an
idealised picture of a generous, peace-loving, promise-keeping prince. With the additional information
that this self-image brought ruination on many princes (or
that Machiavelli believed it did), it becomes clear that
Machiavelli’s (primary) intention in this linguistic action
was to denigrate freely circulating notions of princely
virtuosity and undermine the established humanist tradition
of princely morality as reflected in the genre of
advice-books. 55

So, to understand is to grasp the intention. Does this mean
that the thinker who performed the linguistic action has
some kind of a privileged access to the significance of his
utterances? Aren’t there meanings which escape the
self-understanding of speakers writers? Are we being
invited to step into the shoes of the thinker in order to
recover his meanings? John Keane makes these criticisms and
he makes them rather trenchantly. 56

In reply, Skinner clarifies that his methodological
prescription to recover the intentions of the given thinker
does not mean stepping into his shoes. He says:

“To recognise that the man waving his arms in the
next field is warning me is not a matter of
identifying the ideas inside his head....It is
merely a matter of grasping the fact that
arm-waving can count as warning, and that this is
the convention he is exploiting....Nothing in the
way of 'empathy' is required, since the meaning of the episode is entirely public and intersubjective.

We can understand the intended force of a text by reconstructing the intellectual context of it, the prevailing normative vocabulary and the issues already on the agenda to which the text may be responding.

This context does not determine the meaning. It only specifies the range of 'conventionally recognizable meanings', which, 'in a society of that kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate'.

Skinner seems to be suggesting that communicative intentions are formed in the medium of established languages. An established language is the range of prevailing discursive possibilities which, we might add, form individual agent's intentions and in turn, get formed by various speech-acts. To interpret is to recover intention and the discursive possibilities surrounding it.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Ibid., pp.xiv-xv.

5. Ibid., p.178.


7. Ibid., paragraph 261.


9. In the Addition to paragraph 166 of Philosophy of Right Hegel says that women are not capable of sciences, philosophy and some of the arts. If they run the government, it will be on the basis of arbitrary inclinations and opinions. See Knox, n.6, pp.263-4.


13. Elshtain’s observation that, for Hegel, Civil Society and the State compose the public sphere, is problematic. For Hegel, publicity is associated with universality, citizenship, and the State. While Civil Society has elements of these in the form of corporations and police, it is also, perhaps primarily, the realm of particularity. Note how Hegel refers to the family and Civil Society as ‘the spheres of private rights and private welfare’, in paragraph 261 of the
Philosophy of Right. The public and the private in Hegel do not coincide with Elshtain’s distinction between the two (necessity-freedom, familial-political, female-male). Hannah Pitkin, incidentally, points out some of the difficulties of using the terms ‘public’, ‘private’ clearly and coherently. Saying that these terms must be used in a relative sense, she gives three criteria of publicness: 1) that which is not hidden or of limited access; 2) that which affects all or most; 3) that which is public in direction or control. See Hannah Pitkin, ‘Justice: On Relating Public and Private’, Political Theory (California), Vol. 9, No. 3, 1981, pp. 327-352.


15. Ibid., p. 128.
16. Ibid., p. 129.
17. Ibid., p. 131.
18. Ibid., p. 132.
19. Ibid., p. 132.


21. Ibid., p. 257.
22. Ibid., p. 257.
23. Ibid., p. 255-56.


27. Indian Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 11, No. 4, October 1984.


31. I owe this point to Kelkar's somewhat different comment; Kelkar, n.29, p.553.


34. Charles Taylor, Social Theory as Practice (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.28-9.


36. Taylor, n.34, pp.2-3.

37. Taylor, n.34, p.5.

38. Rajeev Bhargava defines social practice as 'the mutual interlocking of the actions of different individuals'. Each individual agent engaged in the practice may not be clear about the full significance of that practice. For details, see Rajeev Bhargava, Individualism in Social Science (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992); see particularly the last part.


41. Ibid., pp.15-57.
42. Taylor, n.34, p.29.
43. Taylor, n.40., p.36.
46. Connolly, n.45, p.10.
47. Connolly, n.45, pp. 22-30.
49. Connolly, n.45, p.38.
50. Connolly, n.45, pp.184-86.
55. Ibid., p.115.
60. See Skinners statement of his position, n.58, p.279.