

O'Donnell the Conceptual Artist

There are many ways to contribute to the collective enterprise we call comparative politics. Some of us derive the logical implications of basic assumptions; some get inside the heads of the actors they study; some reconstruct causal processes; some gather data; some develop better research methods; some test hypotheses. And some, like Guillermo O'Donnell, change the way we see the world.

Guillermo O'Donnell made many kinds of contributions to social science, including mentoring generations of students and building CEDES and the Kellogg Institute; but his greatest contributions were the concepts he created. It may seem easy to coin a new term, but inventing a concept that captures an important phenomenon so well that everyone picks it up and uses it is a rare achievement. Robert Dahl (and Charles Lindblom) did it with "polyarchy," Juan Linz with "authoritarianism," Arend Lijphart with "consociational democracy," Theda Skocpol with "social revolution"; and there are a few others. Guillermo accomplished this feat repeatedly, with "bureaucratic-authoritarian regime," "impossible game," "brown areas," "delegative democracy," and at least some of the many evocative concepts from his collaboration with Phillippe Schmitter. The only social scientist I can think of who introduced as many new concepts was Max Weber, who had the advantage of helping to found the discipline.

The value of these conceptual contributions transcend any one dataset, regression, model, article, or book. They appeal directly to our intuitions. We don't feel the need to test them because we sense that they are true. Intuition plays a more important role in science than some realize. Our own informal understandings of how the world works may be less reliable than mathematical or logical tools, but consciously or not, we rely on them all the time. Our intuitions are essential for bridging the chasm between the symbolic language of theory and things we can actually observe. Our intuitions also help us judge immediately whether a proposed causal connection deserves to be taken seriously. They determine whether the reaction to a new idea is applause or laughter. Few hypotheses in comparative politics have been derived purely from the formal assumptions of a theory. In almost all cases, at some point, researchers draw on their common-sense knowledge of the political world to translate the *logical* implications of a theory into observable implications. Without such translation, no theory would be testable.

Naming phenomena makes them more real to us. Guillermo had a talent for bestowing catchy names, like "brown areas" and "impossible game." This is a dangerous talent to have because we humans too easily confuse cleverness (such as alliteration, rhyming, and paradoxes) with insight. But I can't think of an instance in which Guillermo abused this talent. His concepts appropriately called attention to phenomena that were truly important: a chilling new type of authoritarian regime, the dehumanizing impact of authoritarianism, the disappointments of new democracies, and the failings of the state.

The concepts he coined are deceptively simple: condensations of whole, complex stories (I would say theories, but Guillermo demurred from claiming the term) with actors, settings, motives, and tensions. Telling a satisfying story is really what it means to explain something. Guillermo's concepts were titles for dramas. The impossible game was a tragedy, brown areas a lament, delegative democracy a warning, and bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes a horror show.

When we use Guillermo O'Donnell's concepts, we speak his language, see the world through his eyes, and share his concerns. When we adopt his concepts, we also become a community: a group of people sharing a common language, a research agenda, even a political agenda and an identity.

I was Guillermo's colleague for fifteen years at the Kellogg Institute, where I had the opportunity to see him at work on a regular basis, but how he arrived at these insights is still a mystery to me. I know it required passion, brilliance, deep scholarship, and engagement with unfolding events, but I am sure there is no recipe for combining these ingredients. It is an art, and Guillermo was an artist. Who knows what future political or social phenomenon will pass unnoticed because Guillermo O'Donnell is not here to point it out to us?