Max Weber’s Missing Definition of ‘Political Action’ in his ‘Basic Sociological Concepts’: Simultaneously a Commentary on Some Aspects of Kari Palonen’s Writings on Max Weber

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Abstract
The argument of this paper is that while Weber has a well-developed position on the contingency of all political action, as Kari Palonen has persuasively demonstrated, the idea of political society is given neither prominence nor place in his ‘Basic Sociological Concepts’. The alternative in the classical sociological tradition would be to give prominence to the idea of society in place of the political community and its Aristotelian tradition. Weber instead gives preference to the open-ended possibilities of social action and his ideal typification of social action. Where power, legitimacy and the political order are discussed in the ‘Basic Sociological Concepts’, Weber eschews any normative commitment to, or specification of, political society in favour of the analysis of the means and action types underlying the political in human history. Pace Palonen’s interpretation, there can be no synthesis between Weber’s observations of his contemporary political scene and his strictly sociological theory of action.

Keywords: Political society, society, social action, contingency, necessity, Palonen, political organization, state.

The question of ‘Weber’s Relevance as a Theorist of Politics’ can be—and has already been in numerous publications—answered in at least two different contexts; either by means of historical reconstruction of his writings during the time of their origin as part of a ‘history of political concepts’ or with respect to some present problems of political theory.1

1. Given the well-known difficulties of translations of German concepts into English—especially where Max Weber is concerned—I use my own translations throughout this text—and sometimes add the German concepts; for the context of political science, Giovanni Sartori, The Theory of Democracy Revisited (Chatham: Seven Bridges Press, 1987), in chapter 7.2, discusses the popular, false and—at least for a German—irritating English translations of Weber’s theoretical vocabulary in detail—especially Herrschaft = Authority—and states that: ‘the misinterpretation of “Herrschaft” resulted in a catastrophe for the whole semantic field of terms like “Autorität”, “Macht”, “Gewalt” und “Zwang”’ (p. 188 of the German edition, Darmstadt 1992, my translation); Sven Eliaeson, in Max Weber’s Methodologies (Cambridge: Polity Press,
My contribution is more of the second type. Naturally, even a more systematic approach such as this cannot neglect the historical context and background, from which Weber’s writing arose. To this day the claim of their actual relevance consequently requires the demonstration of some lasting common ground, or at least sincere similarities in this respect.

The thesis of my contribution is that such a common ground can be found in the appearance and development of a specific perception of the modern society as a political society. This society, for the first time in history, more or less appears completely as human fabrication, depending on human action. This action—individual as well as collective—is neither ‘free’ in a philosophically absolute sense, nor is it determined. Though there always exist restrictions, namely the scarcity of all kinds of resources, including knowledge, choices for different human action are also always possible. Thus, contingency and the necessity to decide structure the actual context and base of human action—and the contemporary modern self-perception has become aware of this, that is reflexive. ‘We are not only free to choose but also forced to choose’, as Sven Eliaeson writes with reference to Max Weber’s ‘value-aspect-choice methodology’. Neither religion nor natural law, neither a tradition nor a culture can any longer indisputably claim a cosmological preponderance. The irreducible plurality of views as well as the permanent contestability of normative claims prevent integration and common ground for the necessary reproduction of human relations. Therefore, the presumed fundamental unit of these relations, which has been called ‘society’ ever since the writings of the early Scottish enlightenment and the appearance of a positive theory of this ‘object’ in Auguste Comte’s works, also became critical and eroded. It was already so at the time of Weber, who was among the first to avoid the very concept ‘society’ after its relatively short career. After Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Max Weber was among the most radical and consequent in bearing what Sven Eliaeson called the ‘post-enlightenment anguish of polytheism’ and the ‘human predicament in the face of modernity’.

2002), frequently refers to problematic translations: ‘...it seems to me that any translation almost requires a presupposed metaposition. Many fissures in Weber’s image are due to Anglo-Saxon dependence on translations; it is well known that there are a number of concepts that simply do not lend themselves to translation’ (pp. 146-47).

2. In this paper I will refer without further notice to my books Die politische Gesellschaft. Kontingenz und Dezision als Probleme des Regierens und der Demokratie (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1999) and Kontingenz und Dezision (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2000).


It is well known that he then, in the first paragraphs of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, puts ‘social action’ in the former place of ‘society’ as the object of sociology thus establishing a scientific program to understand and explain how ‘societal orders and powers’ become fabricated and reproduced through the networks of social actions.

Two possible misunderstandings need to be excluded briefly before I try to detect the specific position of ‘political action’ as a sub-type of ‘social action’ in Weber’s theory. The first concerns Weber’s concept of an action-based sociology, the second my concept of ‘political society’.

As Weber already scrupulously explains in the first paragraph of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* the nominal definition of ‘action’, especially its element of ‘subjective meaning’ (‘subjektiver Sinn’), does not include the prejudice that, empirically speaking, all human behaviour always has such a reconstructable meaning; and even if so, the rational method or approach of Weber’s interpretative program specifically does not include the pretension that all rationally reconstructed meanings or motives of individual action therefore are ‘rational’ in a normative sense. The ‘rationality’ of this approach at first refers to the construction(!) of ideal-types of action, while, as Weber points out, ‘the real action in most cases goes on in dull half-consciousness or even without any consciousness of its “intended meaning” (“gemeinten Sinn”). The actor “feels” it more uncertain rather than knowing it or “making it clear” to himself, in most cases he acts instinctively (“triebhaft”) or habitually (“gewohnheitsmäßig”).’

When ‘political action’ becomes our topic further on, we should therefore always keep the distinction between ideal-types and empirical references to political action in mind when reading Weber’s texts. This will help us to avoid epistemic confusion by deducing normative concepts of politics and the political from Weber’s ideal-types of political action.

As briefly introduced previously, Weber’s late and elaborated sociology of action avoided the concept of ‘society’, replacing it with processual categories like ‘societalization’ (‘Vergesellschaftung’). In doing so he tried to escape the then common misuse of ‘collective concepts’ (‘Kollektivbegriffen’); such a misuse treats entities (‘Gebilde’) like ‘state’, ‘cooperative’ or ‘society’ as ‘acting’ collective personalities (“‘handelnde”


Kollektivpersönlichkeiten’), but action in Weber’s view is always and only ‘behaviour of one or many single persons’. The coordination or regularities of these activities emerging beyond the single person, seen from the point of view of an observer, then creates the possibility of using hybrid categories like those mentioned above.

So the question which may arise is whether my concept of ‘political society’ does not stand in contradiction to the nominal axiomatic of Weber’s individualistic action-theory. The answer is no. This would be a misunderstanding of the content and concept of my approach, which, like Weber’s—and definitely influenced by him—is strictly action-based. Nevertheless, also following Weber, one has to take into account that on the level of self-perception and constructions of individuals in the present as well as in Weber’s time, ‘society’ exists like other emergent entities. These individuals, when acting, follow their perceptions—which thus become sociological facts (‘soziologische Tatbestände’). Hence one argument for using the term ‘society’ is merely pragmatic and it is at once an option to relate a certain time-diagnosis (‘Zeitdiagnose’) to the specific nature of typical social relations at a certain point in time. The term (political) ‘society’ thus is not a theoretical concept in the strict sense but specifies this diagnosis. The second argument is somewhat paradoxical: particularly the recognition that in modern societies of this type, more precisely—the way Kari Palonen likes it—the very recognition that in our present the reproduction of a network of all kinds of social relations can only be established and ordered and de facto is established and ordered on the basis of political decisions justifies the name ‘political society’. Finally, as demonstrated in my book, the presumed sociological category ‘society’ cannot be grounded on sociological terms—be it action, communication or other. Instead it depends on politics, which determines not only the boundaries and memberships of ‘societies’, as in ‘Swedish Society’, but also structures social relations and actions of individuals via positive law in every sphere of social life. A genuine apolitical sphere exists no longer in the sense that politics could not at any time change the conditions of the particular social actions and relations within it. In a ‘political society’ everything is at least virtually political, that is it can become politicized from within via political action or by authoritative decisions from outside. If this politicization does not

9. Kari Palonen in his friendly address to me in the introduction of his Eine Lobrede für Politiker (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2002), p. 10, seems to be a victim of such a misunderstanding.
take place, it is usually the result of political decisions, like in the constitution of the ‘private sphere’ or ‘private property’.11

Any serious consideration of Weber’s publications about politics and related concepts has to take into account his own notorious distinction between scientific (‘wissenschaftlich’) and political statements, which he had developed further with some emphasis on the background of the Neo-Kantian writings of Heinrich Rickert. In its most simplified form Weber’s claim means that scientific statements have to be grounded in empirical validity and description, and they can only concern the being (‘Sein’) of things, relations and so on, while political statements usually belong to the realm of normative claims (‘Sollen’) and individual volition (‘Wollen’). Politics may thus be a matter in scientific as well as political statements of Weber. Weber himself, in his well-known accurateness, in many cases explicitly comments on the either scientific or political character of his writings, usually in his political writings in the years between 1917 and 1919. As is well known from his biography during this period he was engaged in politics as a politician, writing articles for newspapers and journals, delivering speeches and lectures within and beyond the academic world, and, last but not least, he was involved in the process of founding a radical liberal and democratic party. This period ended abruptly three weeks before the election to the (‘Weimarer’) National Assembly when, to Weber’s deep disappointment, the party-oligarchy of the Deutsche Demokratische Partei (DDP) nominated him only at a very backward and hopeless position on its list.

A typical example for an explicit political publication and Weber’s respective declaration can be quoted from the first paragraph of his publication ‘Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland’ of summer 1918: ‘This political treatise...says nothing new to an expert of state-law and it also does not correspond to (‘deckt sich’) the authority of any scientific discipline (‘einer Wissenschaft’), because the final statements of volition cannot be decided by scientific means’.12

It may be of interest, and seems to be neglected sometimes in certain interpretations of Weber’s most famous publication ‘Politik als Beruf’, that at least the written and finally published version of it had been prepared by Weber almost immediately after his aforementioned resignation as a politician13 and significantly starts with the explicit claim to

11. One could argue that, instead of ‘political society’, the proper concept would be ‘polity’ — but again this term has such a specific connotation in political science which would lead to misunderstandings yet again.


treat the question from the ‘standpoint of a sociological perspective’\textsuperscript{14}—that is presumably in a scientific ‘value-free’ manner.

That Weber himself quite often explicitly claims a strict and consequent distinction between scientific and political statements and respective publications does not necessarily mean that he always succeeds in doing so in practice. So, any interpretation and reconstruction of Weber’s writings on politics will be confronted with the complex and sometimes contradictory programme of his own approach and its application to specific occasions.

The distinction scientific-political that has been introduced and applied thus far in this text to two publications of Weber is not congruent with other distinctions concerning the aim and especially the inherent rhetorical construction of a text. As Kari Palonen has recently convincingly demonstrated, the chosen and proclaimed ‘standpoint of a sociological perspective’ in ‘Politik als Beruf’ does not imply that Weber addressed his auditorium and his readers in a neutral manner or without evident intentions to convince them about certain partisan, that is political positions and views on politics and the profession as well as the vocation of a true politician in a kind of ‘rhetoric of provocation’\textsuperscript{15}.

But in search of Weber’s ‘theory of politics’—are we, with respect to the scientific-political distinction, arguing on a solid ground if we first and foremost follow Kari Palonen in stating that ‘Politik als Beruf’ is somehow the synthesis and final statement, as ‘the primary source’\textsuperscript{16} of it? Here I have serious doubts. My first objection is directed at the inherent contention of the view that Weber had ever precisely formed the synthesis between his political and his sociological writings. It is true that in his political writings he always included substantial sociological elements, especially the historical examples and nominal definitions from his systematic sociological work, but these texts primarily seem to be framed by and result in their inner logic from the specific and occasional intention of Weber writing \textit{as a politician}.

Consequently, I will try first to understand Weber’s concept of politics from the systematic and nominal part of \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft}. The analytical object of such an approach is not Weber as a person—like in Wolfgang Mommsen’s or Wilhelm Hennis’ well-recognized treatises\textsuperscript{17}

also mentions that, on November 15th 1918, the revolutionary government of Berlin had considered offering Weber the ‘ministry of the interior’ because of his expertise in constitutional questions.

\textsuperscript{14} Max Weber, GPS, p. 493.
\textsuperscript{15} Palonen, \textit{Eine Lobrede für Politiker}, p. 17 and passim.
\textsuperscript{16} Palonen, \textit{Eine Lobrede für Politiker}, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{17} Wolfgang Mommsen, \textit{Max Weber und die deutsche Politik 1890–1920} (Tübingen,
— but the design and content of his system of basic sociological concepts (‘Soziologische Grundbegriffe’). Kari Palonen’s ‘Das “Webersche Moment”’, though focussing programmatically only on Weber’s ‘work’ (‘Werk’) and establishing, on the one hand, a clear distinction between ‘work’ and ‘his person’, is in danger, on the other hand, of implying the inherent assumption of a homogeneity or finality of the enormous and heterogeneous corpus of Weber’s writings. But such homogeneity or unity of disparate texts, produced over a period of more than 30 years, on different occasions and for distinct purposes, is clearly more a construction of observational interpretation than a matter of fact. More so, it seems to be more or less the necessary result of an ‘intertextual’ approach, which cannot always completely avoid ‘the fallacy of anachronism’ once pointed out by Quentin Skinner. I do not question that such an interpretative synthesis like the ‘Weberian Moment’ forms a legitimate and fruitful scientific aim, and, especially in the case of Kari Palonen’s work on Weber, I do share many of his views and results about Weber’s political thinking concerning the central experience of the genuine modern contingency of life and its respective consequences. However, this kind of interpretative approach necessarily neglects Weber’s own intentional conception of his systematic sociological approach to define, describe and understand past and present ‘societal orders and powers’ by using a system of nominal categories and basic concepts. To quote Wilhelm Hennis: ‘Even if it remained a torso, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft is definitely his main-work (“Hauptwerk”)’. To put ‘Politik als Beruf’ in this place instead neglects Weber’s own and strict program to distinguish between ‘scientific’ and ‘normative’ or voluntaristic statements. This kind of neglect is in danger of circumventing Weber’s own and genuine theory as a whole.


19. See also in Palonen, Eine Lobrede für Politiker, 11ff.


21. Hennis, Max Webers Fragestellung, p. 36; for my purposes I can leave aside the question carefully treated by Wolfgang Schluchter, Religion und Lebensführung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), II, 597ff., of whether this ‘Hauptwerk’ really and according to Weber’s intention formed one work; for my interpretation the only importance is the time and intentional status of the chapter on ‘sociological concepts’, which is treated here as Weber’s ‘last word in his own affairs’ (‘Letztes Wort in eigener Sache’).
From this brief introduction of my own approach it still remains a surprise—at least for me—that political action as a single category is not of genuine concern in the first part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. How does its absence fit with all those recent approaches that perceive Weber first and foremost as a *homo politicus*? Under the heading of ‘sociological doctrine of categories’ (‘Soziologische Kategorienlehre’)22 Weber explains ‘basic sociological concepts’ in his first chapter and he continues in the second with ‘basic sociological categories of economic action’ (‘…des Wirtschaftens’).23 Neither in the first chapter do we find a paragraph devoted particularly to political action, nor does Weber add a third chapter which could have had the title ‘basic sociological concepts of politicking’—to use Kari Palonen’s ‘elegant expression’.24 However, this systematic25 neglect does not mean that reference to political phenomena and concepts, which presumably could have appeared in a singled-out paragraph or even sub-chapter are not present at all in the first part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.

One possible answer against the background of the development of academic disciplines as well as the general perceptions of the political in Weber’s lifetime can be excluded on the basis of Kari Palonen’s former research on the development of the political as a concept of action—instead of exclusively as the name of a discipline in the tradition set up by Aristotle. He convincingly demonstrates, with abundant evidence, that the ‘changes of horizons from a disciplinary concept of politics to an action concept’26 at the time of Weber’s writing had already started half a century ago.27 Even if during Weber’s lifetime the action concept of

22. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich as editors of Max Weber’s *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), translate (?) this heading into ‘Conceptual exposition’—why?
23. It is not clear—at least to me—why Weber uses ‘Grundbegriffe’ (basic concepts) in the heading of chapter 1 and ‘Grundkategorien’ (basic categories) in the heading of chapter 2 of WuG.
25. Was it really a ‘systematic’ neglect, as is presumed here? Johannes Winckelmann in his introduction to the revised fifth edition of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, p. xxv, calls the chapters on the ‘sociological categories’ (chapters 1 and 2 of WuG) ‘unfinished’. I’m not familiar with the recent editorial knowledge and research and whether it could provide clarification of this.
27. In the case of Joseph Held’s article on Politics of 1864 in Rotteck’s and Welcker’s significant ‘Staatslexikon’ Palonen, *Politik als Handlungs begriff*, p. 33, states it is an ‘unequivocal transformation to an action-concept of politics’.
politics had still not become prevalent or dominant, Weber must have been familiar with its prominent appearance in the writings from Bismarck to Treitschke. Why then, being innovative and against positivist and organic approaches of ‘society’ in establishing an action-based theory of societalization, should he have hesitated to ground his understanding of the political, based on the same epistemological premises?

Maybe his distinction between his scientific writing as a sociologist and his individual political statements has to be taken more seriously than is usually the case. So, how does the political appear in the ‘basic sociological concepts’?

It is easy to see that an answer to this question presupposes a concept of the political—either my own or that of Weber. To avoid a vicious circle I will first search for the explicit use of words related to the political in the first 17 paragraphs of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. The findings may appear somehow surprising, given the fact that certain paragraphs explicitly treat categories which are usually seen to be of genuine political character like ‘legitimate order’ (§5, 6, 7 ‘Legitime Ordnung’) ‘fight’28 (§8 ‘Kampf’), ‘emergence of statued order’ (§13 ‘Entstehung gesatzter Ordnung’), ‘power’ and ‘rulership’29 (§16 ‘Macht’ und ‘Herrschaft’). But in his notoriously detailed commentaries and illustrations to all the aforementioned basic concepts Weber uses words immediately related to politics or the political only on marginal occasions. What follows is the complete list of these references in the first 16 paragraphs—while the next paragraph on the ‘political organization’30 (§17 ‘Politischer Verband’) will be treated separately afterwards.30

28. While Weber in German explicitly uses ‘Kampf’ and not ‘Konflikt’, most Anglo-Saxon ‘translations’ like Roth and Wittich (Economy and Society, p. 38) use ‘conflict’—thus repressing the open agonal character of Weber’s terminology; see above also the remarks to the common ‘translation’ of ‘Gewalt(samkeit)’ by ‘force’ (German: ‘Kraft’) instead of ‘violence’.

29. The translation of ‘Herrschaft’ is really a problem; because according to Weber the obedience to an ‘order’ (‘Befehl’) is essential in all contexts, Parson’s translation as ‘authority’ is the most problematic leaving one with the choice between ‘rulership’ and ‘domination’; Weber very often emphasizes the personal element of ‘Herrschaftsordnung’ which seems to make the translation with ‘rulership’ most appropriate.

30. Again the translation of ‘Verband’ is difficult, because in German the word also stands for ‘association’, as in ‘voluntary association’ (see Weber’s use in §10, Nr. 4 and §15 of WuG); since the political version of it again at least implicitly relates to rulership as an element of hierarchy also within the ‘Verband’, I here follow the translation of Roth and Wittich (Economy and Society, p. 52, and especially p. 54) as ‘organization’—leaving the complicated German law term ‘Anstalt’ (like in ‘Anstaltsstaat’ aside); but the translation ‘political organization’ especially in the case of ‘state’, is not always quite appropriate, because Weber’s concept of ‘organization’
§1, I , Nr. 11 31
Weber in his first paragraph on the concept of ‘action’ (‘Handeln’), explaining the methodological construction of ideal-types, gives the example of ‘a consequent, conditioned by mystic, acosmistic attitude to life (e.g. to politics)’ (‘einer konsequenten, mystisch bedingten, akosmistischen Haltung zum Leben [z.B. zur Politik]’). Obviously, giving this example, it was not Weber’s intention to articulate any substantial ideas about ‘Politik’; it cannot be determined whether he talks here about the action-based concept of politics; it should be noted however that, while explaining his central category (social) ‘action’ ([soziales] ‘Handeln’) extensively, he does not once mention ‘political action’ or related matters.

§6, Nr. 2 32
In this paragraph Weber distinguishes the different types of ways in which the legitimacy of an order can be guaranteed, among them ‘law’ (‘Recht’), and he then writes that there may exist for example ‘a “law” guaranteed hierocratically or politically or…through agreement’ (ein ‘hierokratisch oder politisch oder…durch Einigung garantiertes “Recht”’). Again the focus of this statement is not on politics—but on ‘positive law’ (which may result from political decisions as we can read elsewhere).

§10, Nr. 4 33
Distinguishing ‘open’ from ‘closed social relationships’ and distinguishing afterwards possible ‘motives’ of closure, he mentions ‘political citizens associations (for example in classical antiquity)’ (‘politische Bürgerverbände [z.B. der Antike]’). Despite the fact that Weber’s use of the concept of ‘Bürger’ here seems to relate more to ‘citoyens’ as to ‘bourgeois’ or more precisely to the Greek understanding of the politeuómenoi or politai, again this marginal remark cannot give any substantial hint of Weber’s conscious conception of the political under modern conditions in this part of the text.

§11, Nr. 1 34
In this paragraph Weber is distinguishing and discussing different foundations of ascription (‘Zurechnung’) of action to a certain ‘social

finally rests on instrumental rationality, the organization always has a purpose—but the ‘state’ according to Max Weber explicitly does not (see for instance WuG, p. 821).

relationship’, especially either to mutually responsible members35 (’beteiligten “Solidaritätsgenossen”’) or just to certain involved representatives (’Vertreter’); in this context Weber mentions the ‘representative agent (’Vertreter’’) of a political or economic association’.

§11, Nr. 2b36
Weber here mentions the ‘political organization’ (’politischer Verband’) as an example of ‘closed social relationships’, ‘which maintain monopolized chances37 through their own violence’ (’geschlossene Beziehungen, welche die monopolisierten Chancen durch eigene Gewaltsamkeit behaupten’). Here Weber obviously anticipates his own definition in paragraph 17, which will be discussed later, but again the mere use of the adjective ‘political’ does not disclose any deeper understanding of the kind we are searching for.

§15, Nr. 138
Weber here defines the term ‘enterprise’ (’Betrieb’),39 which at first is not used in its specific economic meaning, and then continues, ‘under the concept of ‘enterprise’ of course also falls the conduct of political…activities’ (’Unter den Begriff des “Betriebes” fällt natürlich auch der Vollzug von politischen…Geschäften’). Despite the terms ’Betrieb‘ und ’Geschäfte‘ in German, Weber here does not especially refer to the narrower economic dimensions of these concepts, but to the more general type of activities through which—among others—political associations or organizations try to reach their goals.

Concluding this brief overview from the use of terms for the political an assessment may be made that the underlying treatment of the whole

35. This translation of Roth and Wittich (Economy and Society, p. 46) seems too weak; Weber’s term ‘Solidaritätsgenossen’ in German at that time had an obvious reference to members of cooperatives and the frequent use of ‘Genosse’ (‘comrade’) in the socialist working class movement of his period.
37. Given the essential role of Weber’s frequently used term ‘Chance(n)’ for his contingent view of politics—I prefer not to translate it by ‘opportunity’ (’Möglichkeit’).
39. The translation of ‘Betrieb’ into English is very difficult, because the German word refers, depending on the context, to ‘firm’ as well as to all kinds of ‘activities’ or its manifest outcome in general; Weber’s definition in §15 tends rather to the open meaning: ‘Betrieb soll ein kontinuierliches Zweckhandeln bestimmter Art…heißen’ (’enterprise shall be named a continual acting towards specific ends of a definite kind’); the part of the definition ‘bestimmter Art’ (’of a definite kind’) is not explicitly explained by Weber in this paragraph—but it seems evident that here ‘acting of a definite’ kind relates to variants of ‘rationality’.

topic of the political remains marginal in the first 16 paragraphs and without theoretical significance. In my view this is not a necessary consequence of Weber’s intention to give a systematic foundation of an action-based sociology, because from a sociological point of view, especially if it is action-based, the political dimension of human action could also be treated and singled out with more emphasis. Quite in opposition to other approaches, as for instance Hannah Arendt’s, Weber in his ‘sociological doctrine of categories’ especially in the famous second paragraph, distinguishes four different ‘ideal-type motives’ of human action, whereas Arendt, in a phenomenological kind of concept-construction, differentiates ‘action’ from ‘fabrication’ and so on. But Weber’s differentiation operates not along phenomenologically defined ontological spheres (politics, economics, culture etc.), but on the basis of his general theory of evolutionary ‘rationalization’. It refers to a set of ‘ideal-typical’ subjective ‘motives’ (‘Motive’), which ‘determine’ (‘bestimmen’) the very kind of action: these specific ‘motives’ are themselves related to the steps of evolutionary rationalization and describe different ways through which they are epistemically generated:

‘instrumentally rational’: ‘through expectation...’,
‘value-rational’: ‘through conscious belief’,
‘affectual, especially emotional’: ‘through actual affects and emotions’,
‘traditional’: ‘through ingrained habituation’ (‘eingelebte Gewohnheit’).

So these motives vary not only in their content but also in their specific way of intra-personal generation. It does not seem arbitrary to me that instrumental rationality is generated on the basis of empirically grounded experience resulting in ‘expectations’ of regular behaviour or action of others, while value-rationality rests at least on ‘conscious belief’ — both motives definitely deserve more respect than emotional affects and almost unconscious routines of action in Weber’s own normative preference-order.

When Weber writes that these ideal-type ‘motives’ or an empirical mixture of them, determine (‘bestimmen’) the kind of action, one must not understand this in any deterministic or causal way of action-theory,
but against the background of Weber’s interpretative paradigm of sociology: we as observers or sociologists can relate the observed behaviour of others either to the mentioned ideal-type motivations—or a mixture of it—or we will not be able to ‘understand’ the meaning of it at all.

So how do these four ideal-types of ‘understandable’ action contribute to our aim to understand Weber’s theory of politics, since we find no explicit mentioning of political action in his text?

If we for a moment leave aside our ‘intra-text-perspective’ of interpretation in order to follow the examples of others, we can find in certain paragraphs of ‘Politik als Beruf’ the famous distinction between two different kinds of ‘ethic’ which are of relevance to the professional and vocational politician. Usually the distinction between an ‘ethic of responsibility’ and an ‘ethic of convictions’ is not discussed with regard to the introduced distinctions of action-motives in the second paragraph of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. This is somewhat surprising because we first have the knowledge about the common biographical as well as historical background of these ‘theoretical’ paragraphs of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft which are written by Weber in the same period as ‘Politik als Beruf’. So in spite of the previously introduced strict distinction between scientific sociology and political writing, at least these two texts have much in common with reference to Weber’s intellectual development and actual situation. If we leave the ethical and normative inclinations of the two concepts in ‘Politik als Beruf’ aside for a moment and abstract from their inherent motives for action that which is ethically demanded, we have to regard the results as possible types of action; otherwise it would be absolutely senseless that Weber treats and discusses them as desirable kinds of action. But if Weber’s enumeration of typical motives of action in the second paragraph of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft is comprehensive and complete, then consequently the two kinds of motives we

43. See Sven Eliaeson, Max Weber’s Methodologies, 41ff. for an illuminating introduction of Max Weber’s approach of ‘rational understanding’—as opposed to intuitive or psychological—and his remark that ‘Weber’s views on explanation were opaque and scattered throughout his work’ (p. 43).

44. One of the few almost contemporary and still one of the best reconstructions of Weber’s ideal-type methodology can be found in Siegfried Landshut, ‘Kritik der Soziologie - Freiheit und Gleichheit als Ursprungsprobleme der Soziologie’, in idem, Politik, Grundbegriffe und Analysen (2 vols.; Berlin: Verlag für Berlin Brandenburg, 2004), I, especially pp. 81-101.

45. Stefan Breuer, Bürokratie und Charisma (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchge- sellschaft, 1994), p. 22, also observes this common background and content and the significant changes Weber’s definitions and concepts have undergone since the pre-war period.
abstracted from the two ethics must fall under the four types. By intending to demonstrate the ‘relativity’ and ‘flexibility’ of the presumed absolute opposition of the two ethics, Kari Palonen touches briefly on our problem, when writing: ‘The ethic of responsibility turns acting into an occasional and relative concept, almost opportunistic as the Weberian principle of instrumental rationality. The ethic of conviction as the boundary of the ethic of responsibility is analogous to the value-rationality as the boundary of the instrumental rationality’.46

So he parallels the ethics of responsibility and instrumental rationality, on the one hand, and the ethics of conviction with value-rationality, on the other. The first parallel from our perspective is almost evident, since all consequential evaluation essentially rests on instrumental rationality or as Weber comments in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: ‘Instrumentally rational acts the one who calculates his action according to aims, means and side-effects’.47

But if the motives for one’s action result from ‘convictions’ as in an ‘ethic of conviction’ must these convictions and motives then always, and in Weber’s scheme, be value-rational? As mentioned above, the motive may also, without further reflection, result from actual affects, emotions or habits—be it ‘of the heart’ or grounded elsewhere. So it seems to be an open and empirical question—at least from a sociological and theoretical point of view—whether the ‘convictions’ directing the motivation of political action are always of a reflexive nature in a sense of value-rationality, or whether they result from the other two mentioned types. In a discussion on the ethics of political action, the two other types may be neglected completely, because in a normative and conceptual sense they do not deserve the name of ‘ethical’ motivations. But, for our understanding of Weber’s at least inherent theory of (political) action, we must broaden our perspective to all four types of motivation and keep in mind what has already been quoted for ‘action’ in general, namely that Weber seems to be convinced that in relation to politics most activities in most cases and especially if not pursued by elites and politicians (by profession and vocation) are ‘instinctive or habitual’.48 So our little exercise in ‘inter-textual’ interpretation may finally have helped us to arrive at the point where we understand, that Weber, in his theoretically grounded sociology of action, on the one hand does not devote any attention to political action or politics as a specific activity. On the other hand, presuming that political action is at

all a sub-type of action to which Weber’s typology of motives can by applied, we are left with an open empirical question as to which ideal-type motive—or mixture of it—would in actual cases be helpful in understanding political action. To put it positively from another perspective: according to Max Weber, ‘political action’, on the conceptual level of his action-theory, is not in principle determined through a specific kind of motive. Despite Weber’s background understanding of the ongoing ‘rationalization’, all four ideal-types of action may still appear and prove their validity in the observation and theoretical interpretation of present politics.

So far I have left out the seventeenth paragraph of Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft on the ‘political organization’49 because here, naturally, words related to ‘politics’ are used more frequently. Thus the method used so far to demonstrate the only marginal, and merely in a theoretical or programmatic sense, relevant use of such words during the preceding pages comes to an end. One has to use a more traditional heuristic to understand this paragraph. Continuing with my general interest I will look especially for uses of ideas and words with regards to an action-oriented concept of politics and the political that in turn could be related to a contingency-based concept of modernity.

Weber in this paragraph first defines the ‘political organization’ (‘Politischer Verband’) through the well-known elements such as ‘rulership’, ‘territory’, ‘use or threat of physical compulsion by the administrative staff’. He then defines the ‘state’ as a specific (modern) case of it by adding two further elements: this political organization must have the form of an ‘institutionalized enterprise’ (‘Anstaltsbetrieb’) and its administrative staff must have reached the ‘monopoly of legitimate physical compulsion’. Despite the fact that in Weber’s and our times the relevant ‘political organization’ according to Weber is always a ‘state’, for this restricted purpose I continue to use the broader concept (‘Oberbegriff’) of ‘political organization’ because its essential (‘wesentliches’) quality of violence (‘Gewaltsamkeit’) remains fundamental also for the definition of ‘state’; the state only differs in the extent it has been successful in monopolizing violence within its own territory.50

49. The general concept of Weber not necessarily refers to institutionalized and organized ‘bodies of politics’ like the concept ‘state’, which became the relevant case of a ‘politischer Verband’ in the process of modernization; all following quotations in this part of my text, if not indicated differently, are from Max Weber, WuG, pp. 29-30.

50. Breuer, Bürokratie und Charisma, p. 22ff. has convincingly demonstrated that the ‘institutional enterprise’ must not be seen as an essential element of Weber’s definition of a modern state.
In this first definition Weber—be it voluntarily or not—does not explicitly use the concept of ‘violence’, but uses ‘compulsion’ (‘Zwang’). But at the same time in his comments to this definition he writes: ‘For political organizations violence (‘Gewaltsamkeit’)\(^{51}\) is clearly neither the sole nor the normal means of administration…but the threat and eventual use of it is however their specific means and in all cases the ultima ratio, if another means failure’. The ‘violence’ (‘Gewaltsamkeit’) of guaranteeing the ‘orders’\(^{52}\) in a certain territory characterizes (‘kennzeichnet’) the ‘political organization’ and thus the modern state.

That Weber uses violence in the sense of ‘Gewaltsamkeit’ as an essential quality and as the decisive element of definition of the very concept of ‘political organization’ becomes evident from this quotation, in which he refers to the two elements from the sentence quoted just before (‘violence…guaranteeing the orders in a territory’): ‘Wherever the two characteristics apply for organizations, which use violence (“Gewaltsamkeit anwenden”)—be it village communities or even single house communities—they hence must be called political organizations’. So even ‘single house communities’ are according to Weber ‘political organizations’ if and insofar as they reach their persistence as ‘order’ by the threat or use of violence. In §17, Nr. 2. against the then common practice of defining the state by its purposes\(^{53}\) Weber states that the “political”\(^{54}\) character of an organization can only be defined by its means, which may be used by other actors or bodies as well but which are specific and indispensable for its character (“Wesen”): violence (“Gewaltsamkeit”).\(^{55}\) Weber continues to give some examples of common uses of the adjective ‘political’ (‘politisch’), like ‘political newspaper’, ‘political club’, and including ‘political consequences’, and states that, in a more significant way, one uses this concept to distinguish from ‘cultural, religious and such like aspects or kinds of persons, things or occurrences and that one means with this practice everything which

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\(^{51}\) Again this substantive is difficult to translate, but its use by Weber indicates that the potential to use violence and the use of violence are essential qualities of the concept of ‘state’ and not just probabilistic possibilities in empirical circumstances; the frequent Anglo-Saxon translation of ‘Gewalt(samkeit)’ by ‘force’ instead of ‘violence’ is problematic.

\(^{52}\) Note the plural here and in similar cases: it is not just ‘its’ order which according to Weber is guaranteed by physical compulsion of the state.


\(^{54}\) These apostrophes by Weber as well as the following emphasis in ‘only’.

relates to the structures of rulership within a political organization, namely the state’.56

Concluding number 2 in §17 he again mentions ‘political clubs’ and ‘political parties’ which are not ‘bearers of the legitimate violence (‘legitim geltenden Gewaltsamkeit’) themselves but which try to influence the political action of the political organization57 ‘non-violently’ and states finally: ‘We will call this kind of action “politically oriented” and distinguish it from true (“eigentlichen”) “political action” of political organizations’.58

For me this leaves no doubt that Weber, at least in his systematic theoretical doctrine of categories, binds at least ‘modern’ politics as action strictly to the concept of ‘political organization’ which in turn is essentially59 defined by its ‘Gewaltsamkeit’,60 that is the essential capacity to legitimately61 use violence. Also with reference to the polity-dimension of the political, Weber’s strict nominalism leaves no space for interpretations which would try to decouple the concept of ‘political action’ from the concept of ‘political organization’, that is under modern conditions the ‘state’.

It is true that in ‘Politik als Beruf’ and on other occasions he calls the common German use of ‘Politik’ a vague and rather broad name for various kinds of activities from the intelligent management of intimate relations by a ‘wise wife’ to the credit-policy of a bank,62 but then he always immediately restricts its meaning to a definition which refers to the distribution of power in or between states, the fight or at least competition between potential elites or leaders, and the necessity to decide between competing principles and values. This is also true for the most

57. Again: without a doubt Max Weber here refers to the state.
59. This typical essentialist German vocabulary (‘Wesen’, ‘eigentlich’, ‘Gewaltsamkeit’ etc.) of Weber must nevertheless be understood against the background of his nominalist and historical epistemology: if according to Weber ‘Gewaltsamkeit’ reveals the ‘Wesen’ of the modern state, it has to be read as part of the definition of the modern, i.e. historical form of a political association.
60. Also in ‘Politik als Beruf’, Weber states that ‘violence is the decisive means of politics’ (GPS, p. 540) or he writes about ‘the specific means (of political action, M.G.) with violence behind it’ (GPS, p. 538); when Palonen, Eine Lobrede für Politiker, p. 113 comments, ‘this way of (Weber’s) speaking seems to refer with respect to Weber’s concept of the political problem’ he tends to mix his own understanding with that of Weber’s.
61. Students often misunderstand Weber’s nominalism: His famous definition does not imply that all use of violence by the state is per se legitimate.
famous definition of ‘Politik’ in ‘Politik als Beruf’: ‘Striving for a proportion of power or for influencing the distribution of power, be it between states or within states between the human groups which it encompasses’. 63

It has been the merit of Kari Palonen’s Das ‘Webersche Moment’ to point at the action-concept of the political which is inherent in this quotation and similar sentences by Weber; especially when he analyzed the often neglected verb ‘striving’ (‘Streben’) and its semantic quality in Weber’s use of it. But again, one must not overlook the fact that the specific content of this ‘striving’ as the action aspect of it is derived only from its relation to the power aspect of the political association. ‘Striving’ as such and in another context would, according to Weber, not deserve the adjective ‘political’—which solely comes from the character (‘Wesen’) of the modern political organization. Hence, Kari Palonen overstretches his interpretation of Weber’s ‘Politik als Beruf’ when he is reading it as ‘the primary source...of the conceptualization of contingency’ 64 of the political, especially when he states himself in a somehow essential style: ‘Striving as an activity is open finality of action: the uncertainty of its results does not determine the paralysis of action’. 65 On the contrary, striving according to Max Weber can only be called a political activity if it has a definite motivation and purpose that is: power. Thus, the ‘uncertainty of results’ refers to the risk involved in the impossibility to control the outcomes of power struggle.

When Kari Palonen in his scholarly commentary to ‘Politik als Beruf’ points to the interesting concept of Weber’s ‘occasional politician’ (‘Gelegenheitspolitiker’) he does it under the heading ‘The one who acts politically is a politician’. 66 The ‘occasional politician’ occurs only once in his writings, when Weber states: ‘We are all occasional politicians, if we use our ballot...or if we applaud or protest in a political meeting...for many humans their complete relation to politics is restricted to that’. 67 In his succeeding little chapter Kari Palonen then ought not, not even indirectly, suggest that the occasional politician does not again have an essential connection to Weber’s concept of power and power struggle; but this is not explicitly mentioned in Kari Palonen’s brief commentary to this concept. Instead Weber’s few examples do

64. Palonen, Das ‘Webersche Moment’, p. 156.
66. Palonen, Eine Lobrede für Politiker, p. 49.
always relate to the state and to the process of power distribution (elections) in it. Therefore it seems appropriate and in line with Weber’s theoretical writing in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* to suggest, that the activities of the ‘occasional politician’ should, in accordance with §17, Nr. 2, be called ‘politically oriented’ activities—and not political action in a strict sense.

So if Kari Palonen tries to ground Weber’s theory of modern contingency, especially in his concept of political action, he fails at least with this argumentation. Neither has Weber a theoretically relevant concept of political action nor does his understanding of ‘striving’ in politics deserve the classification of an ‘open finality’.

Kari Palonen, however, is absolutely right when he understands Max Weber as a theorist of modern political contingency. But the reason for this is not his action theory, which does not pay much attention to political action anyway. Instead there are actually two aspects: on the one hand, Weber’s theory of political organization and, on the other, his very understanding of power.

As has been quoted above, Weber’s theory of the modern state does not have any normative implication. It neither stands in the tradition of natural law based constructivism, nor does it stand in a republican tradition. It has much more in common with the tradition of ‘Realpolitik’ and the ‘realistic school of state theory’ (‘realistische Staatsauffassung’). Despite the fact that Weber finally holds a pragmatic political position in favour of a representative parliamentarism together with pluralistic parties and general elections, he did not pay much attention to the normative participatory aspect of such a polity—neither in his normative nor in his scientific views on the subject. From his approach a direct line of tradition stretches via the influential twenty-second chapter ‘Another Theory of Democracy’ of Joseph A. Schumpeter’s most famous book to

68. As Gary L. Ulmen, *Politischer Mehrwert eine Studie über Max Weber und Carl Schmitt* (Weinheim: Wiley-VCH, 1991), p. 28 correctly contradicts Winckelmann’s opposite but false statement; see also his critique of Wolfgang Mommsen’s still influential original position which saw Weber’s plea for democratic elitism in a parliamentary regime as being in line with the later nazi-idea of a ‘leadership-principle’.

69. Stolleis, *Geschichte des öffentlichen Rechts in Deutschland*, pp. 275-80 and 435-47; focusing strictly on members of the law faculty, Stolleis in the second and third volumes of his excellent work, dealing with German state theory in the late German Reich strangely enough does not even mention Max Weber in his index.

70. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Kapitalismus, Sozialismus und Demokratie* (Bern: A. Francke, 1950), 427-50; the ‘other’ refers to the opposite ‘classical’, i.e. participatory, in Schumpeter’s as well as in Weber’s views ‘unrealistic’ theory of democracy; according to my observation the other chapters of Schumpeter’s ‘classic’ became rarely read and got almost no reception in political science until recently.

what Peter Bachrach in the late 1960s criticized as the political science mainstream ‘Theory of Democratic Elitism’.71

This view of democracy as a ‘method to recruit governing elites’ and to guarantee a non-violent change of governments as a mere procedural method adheres perfectly to my diagnosis of a ‘political society’: during the complex development of reflexive modernization, every transcentd or other normative orientation for common political action or the bonum communis has evaporated into an irreducible pluralism. This result can also be found in Weber’s sociological and theoretical interpretation of his contemporary society, especially in the aftermath of World War One. As a liberal politician, and in his proposals for a new political regime, he reacted in line with his principle of an ethic of responsibility.72 The unavoidable power-struggle for leadership between those who strive for legitimate authority in this democratic system would at least include the chance to bring those ‘ideal-type politicians’ as leaders into office, which are drawn by Weber in the final parts of ‘Politik als Beruf’. They would have to take the essential and necessary decisions every political regime requires in a dynamic and complex world. The fundamental importance of their personal quality and ethical orientation for Weber has to be understood precisely in the context of his inherent perception of the absolute contingency of modern politics in a democratic mass-society. If all transcendent stabilizations and orientations are gone, and if the man-made institutions of democracy rest themselves on weak grounds, then in Weber’s view, only the personal ethics of leadership could provide at least a chance for the quality of those political decisions which would be appropriate given the actual problems. Again, in accordance with the contingency of the ‘political society’, Weber can no longer offer any substantial contents or aims of politics or the polity. Given his theory of the modern state — which derives itself from his basic ideas of historical rulership — which can only be determined by its specific means and not by its purposes and aims, theoretically, Weber could also not turn towards the pathway of modern normative institutionalism.

So he was left with the ideas of leadership and elites — and of ‘politicians worth the name’.73


72. Alexander von Schelting, Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1934), p. 46 observed that Weber as politician always referred to the ethic of responsibility — while in theoretical writings he kept a balance to the ethic of conviction like in ‘Politik als Beruf’.

To concentrate on the desirable ethical qualities of politicians as was done in ‘Politik als Beruf’ leaves the final aims of the polity and decision open. This is even true in the horizons of ethics; because neither peace nor justice nor freedom, in Weber’s eyes, can be scientifically justified as universal aims any longer. And in philosophy as well as in political life, the pluralistic ‘fight of demons’ always continues—and at any moment only power decides their struggle.

If ultimate aims are no longer acceptable the personalities of desirable politicians become essential. In his famous trio ‘passion, responsibility, and (good) political judgement’ (‘Leidenschaft, Verantwortungsgefühl und Augenmaß’) Weber singled out the characteristics of a desirable ideal-type politician most important to him—and these qualifications necessarily must remain formal and without reference to any specific content. As surrogates of former substantial virtues they correspond perfectly to an age of contingency.

One final remark: Weber’s ‘cold’ and ‘realistic’ view of politics and society of his time does not mean that his sociology as such is merely ‘affirmative’. Similar views such as this were taught in many ‘critical’ comparisons to Marxist views, not only in German universities, during the 1970s. Another prominent misunderstanding is to mix his ‘methodological individualism’ with an epistemic ‘subjectivism’ and a complete ‘relativism’. Weber’s writings thoroughly offer a potential for critique, and on many occasions he himself has written about his own sceptical evaluation of the inherent dynamics, both of capitalism in general and the political in particular. The essential value-relation and the decisive interest behind his sociological work has been convincingly characterized by Wilhelm Hennis: how does the modern ‘society’ shape the character of humankind (‘Menschentum’) — given that this ‘society’, according to the action theory of Weber cannot mean anything else but the ‘order and societal powers’ created and continuously kept going by the inter-activities of individuals? Obviously, the idea is circular or in a non-Marxist sense ‘dialectical’ and Weber stands in the tradition of a ‘social constructive theory of society’. Hence, Weber’s darkest vision of the ‘steel-hard casing’ as a threatening consequence of complete ration-

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alization has to be analyzed in terms of a theory of alienation instead of an apology of the necessity of the development of capitalism, bureaucracy or whatever else: if ‘society’ appears to individuals in such a manner that their consciousness is alienated, because they no longer perceive themselves as the actors and creators of it. In this state of consciousness chances and possibilities for political action are no longer recognized. But the view of a sociological observer may be different, because he could detect possibilities of action and decisions which the observed actors do not perceive. At least since 1916, Weber definitely understood his own role in this way, as his political writings demonstrate; but the epistemic concept of judgements of opportunities (‘Möglichkeitsurteile’) was already elaborated in his critical article on Eduard Meyer (1906).

Obviously this alienated state of consciousness may also prevail in ‘political societies’. This can be said especially under the conditions that certain ‘systems’ or ‘spheres’ are treated as ‘given’ and presumably not accessible to political choice and change. But politicization is always, in principle, possible. In Weber’s sense, a critical evaluation of the realities of the ‘political society’ also include ‘objective possibilities’ and not just appearing realities.

Weber’s sociology or theory of action provides a suitable foundation for such an approach, even if Weber himself did not in extenso develop it in this direction. In conclusion, I believe in agreement with Kari Palonen that Weber’s contingency-based action theory provides the precondition to speak of acting at all. Above all, it provides the precondition of political and democratic acting which could, at least potentially, bring about fundamental changes of the ‘orders and societal powers’ of today—including the state as a political organization. The human inclination to render its constitution less violent as it historically appeared until today remains, in Weber’s terms, a ‘chance’ for a contingent future.