The Meaning of Honour in Weber’s Concept of the Nation*

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Abstract
A strong sense of honour and anxiety for the greatness of his nation were significant features of Max Weber’s personality. Historic research about Max Weber has mainly focused on the nationalism of the politician while his theoretical concept of the nation as well as his sense of honour and his concern for the honour of the nations have remained out of sight. Starting from the complexity of the concept of honour in history, its shift from the honour of kings to the honour of the kingdoms and political bodies, and the relevance of honour for modern social and political life, this paper examines the usage of the German words for nation (Volk) and people (Nation) in Weber’s time and in Weber’s writings. After a few remarks about Weber’s concept of the nation it leads up to the conclusion, that—for Weber and after Germany’s catastrophic defeat in the Great War—the honour of the nation was the same thing as the nation-state’s raison d’état.

Keywords: history of concepts, honour, social rank, social status, satisfaction, duels, kingdoms, nation, honour of the nation, raison d’état, Great War.

In spring 2003 the Google search-machine presented, as a result of an enquiry about the German terms for honour (= Ehre) and Nation, some quotations of Weber’s famous lines from ‘Politics as a Vocation’: ‘A nation will forgive damage to its interests, but not injury to its honour’; it is worth taking note of this quotation because it omits the end of Weber’s sentence: ‘and certainly not when this is done in a spirit of priggish self-righteousness’.¹ Who are the people that made public use of Weber’s

* This paper was presented in Uppsala on 5 May, 2003, to the conference of SCASSS (The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences) about Max Weber’s Relevance as a Theorist of Politics.


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sentence in such a way, on the internet? In one sense, it might appear that right wing radicals cut off an essential part of Weber’s sentence for the purpose of ideological misuse and of claiming Max Weber as a witness to the validity of their ideas. It is true, Weber connects nation with honour — central topics of rightist thinking — but in its complete version his sentence relates to the results of the Great War 1914–1918 and to the ensuing Peace Conference, not, however, to an absolute truth.

Nevertheless, the radicals of our days use the same words Weber uses, honour and nation. But do they really understand them the same way Weber did? Surely not, since Weber, in the terms of our days, was no nationalistic radical, though he had very patriotic emotions. Consequently, one must admit that the meanings of the terms honour and nation depend on historical, political, social and individual circumstances. In a conversation between contemporaries from, for example, different social or geographic spheres both sides can talk about honour


2. Since October 2003, the respective websites can no longer be detected by common search-machines like Google. Obviously they have been removed from the net.

or nation, being unaware of the different meanings they associate with those words.

Here we have come to the starting point of our argument, that is, to establish the meaning of the terms *Ehre* and *Nation* as shared by Weber’s peers in his country at his time. The next step will be to establish how Weber personally and in his writings dealt with *honour* and *nation*. Only after that will our final section touch on the topic of this paper, *the meaning of honour in Weber’s concept of the nation*.

1. The meaning of honour and nation among the German upper middle classes in the period of Kaiser Wilhelm II

Probably most people share the assumption that honour is a reward for the virtuous conduct of one’s life, according to St Thomas Aquinas’ reformulation of a sentence of Cicero: ‘honos praemium virtutis’. But unfortunately this definition of honour as resulting from virtue does not solve our epistemological problem, because the meaning of ‘virtue’ is no less changeable through history, countries and social systems than the meaning of honour. Consequently, the question about the basic nature of honour, like that of virtue, remains without a definite answer.

Nevertheless, one can establish its temporary meaning, at least for early modern times. During that period honour was considered as a necessary constituent of any person in a rural, urban or monastic community, or in the armies or palaces. It consisted of dignity and respect — of the dignity which resulted from an individual’s virtue, that is the obedience to the customs or legal rules of one’s profession or social group or state, and of the respect of the other members of that profession, social group or state for the individual’s dignity. Any defamation, insult or even apparent lack of respect could damage a person’s dignity and honour: it implied that the offended person had broken customs or legal rules. Therefore, throughout centuries, the loss of one’s honour meant exclusion from the community, the loss of one’s economic, legal and social existence. That is why people had to do their utmost — even to the point of risking their lives — to defend or to restore their honour when confronted with any offence. And they had to do this in accordance with the customs of their own status group and its claimed reputation.

Within these outlines the term *honour* has its own specific meaning for the members of a certain social group in a particular country and period of time. To put it into more concrete terms, among Weber’s peers, in his country and in his time, people knew at least four different types of *Ehre*:

- a. the inner, moral and religious honour of the individual;
- b. the honour of craftsmen and businessmen;
- c. the honour of the people of the same rank, especially nobility, officers and academic upper middle classes (*Standesehre*);
- d. the honour of the nation.

We shall concentrate on (c) and (d), status honour and honour of the nation. The right to take up arms to defend their honour expressed the social standing and status honour of Max Weber and his peers. In early modern Germany three features might have entitled Max Weber to carry a sword and thus put him into one and the same status group with the aristocracy and the king’s officers: first, having been a student, second, being a doctor and, last, being an officer.

Of course, in the period around 1900 Weber and his peers did not walk around carrying a sword, but they were expected to fight for their honour, because they had to regard their honour as more precious than their lives. Therefore — with the exception of those persons who, on principle, refused to fight duels — they permanently had to be ready to defend their own or the honour of persons who could not bear arms such as women and children or who were not allowed to risk their lives like the members of a royal house.

Since the early modern times the honour of the latter concerned the whole of their realms. They had their noblemen, their officers, their administrative machineries and their courts to fight those subjects who had committed, or were accused of, the crime of lese-majesty (*crimen laesae majestatis*), and they had their armies to defend their honour against their peers, who sat on the thrones of other countries. So we might say: although in the period of the transformation of the community of subjects to the community of citizens — that is in the period of the American and European nation building process in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — it was not a big step from the idea of the king’s honour to the state’s or the nation’s honour, the sovereign’s honour and his country’s honour having been the same thing up to Weber’s times. Since the American War of Independence and the French Revolutionary Wars the kings’ duels have expanded into wars between states and nations.

5. E.g. Ferdinand Tönnies.
Here we come to another crucial question within our line of argument. Everybody knows that in the imperialistic period around 1900 the political emotions and thinking of most people in the majority of European countries were decidedly nationalistic. This paper will not focus on the nationalism of the time, not even on that of Max Weber. Instead, it will ask about the meaning of the term *nation*. Do we really know its meaning? One of the best German encyclopaedias of the period tells us that the terms *Nation* and *Volk* equally meant a section of the human race of a common origin, language, custom and education. That is, the substance of both words was rather an ethnic one. But surprisingly, the word *Volk* was additionally used for the entire citizenry of a state. Consequently, the same term would have been used to comprise all members of the citizenry of a multiethnic state—which constitutes a spectacular difference to the present meaning of the word. To clarify the terms the above quoted encyclopaedia explicitly equated German *Volk, Staatsvolk* with English/French ‘nation’, and German *Nation* with ‘people’/’*peuple*’. Weber’s use of the word *Volk* corresponded exactly to this explanation. In one of his early writings one can find a ‘purely rationalistic’ definition with *Volk* simply described as ‘the totality of the politically united citizenry’. Consequently, in 1893, he referred to the Poles as his ‘national comrades’ (*unsere polnischen Volksgenossen*). Thus, Weber’s understanding of *Volk* comprised—beyond the narrow ethnic sense of *Volk* and *Nation*—among others, also Prussia’s Polish population as members of


7. Meyer 1897, XIX, p. 382. The best information about the German usage of the respective terms through history from the middle ages up to the Nazi period in ‘Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse’ (cf. n. 6). For more recent literature about nation and nationalism see n. 12.


the German Volk. Even in our days many German compounds preserve that ‘rational meaning’ of Volk.¹⁰

Thus far is the difference between Volk and Nation around 1900. In the German usage of the time it might have been correct to call the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh peoples ‘nations’, and because the English dominated Great Britain the Germans regarded Great Britain as the state of the English nation, the English nation-state (Nationalstaat). But obviously, such ethnic, linguistic or cultural explanations of the term could not make clear why, for instance, the French-speaking part of the Belgian, Canadian or Swiss populations were not regarded by everybody as members of the French nation.

It is the Heidelberg professor, Georg Jellinek, the eldest son of the leading preacher of the Viennese Jewish community and one of Max Weber’s closest friends, who can be regarded as the first German academic who trod new paths to find out the proper nature of the nation. In his Allgemeine Staatslehre of 1900 he offered useful preliminaries for a definition of the term: ‘The nation…in its essence is a subjective thing, i.e. [the nation is] the characteristic of a special content of consciousness. A multitude of people who regard themselves united by a multitude of common and specific cultural features and by a shared history and who, therefore, know themselves to be different from others, form a nation.’¹¹

Since the 1980s this subject, the nation, has, once again, challenged the global community of political thinkers.¹² It seems to be only one step

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¹⁰. This ‘technical’ meaning of the term Volk is preserved by the inscription: Dem deutschen Volke at the Reichstag in Berlin and in words like Schweizervolk, Volkswirtschaftslehre, Volkszählung, untere Volksschichten.


from Jellinek’s sentences to the programmatic title of Benedict Anderson’s classic book: he defined the nation as an ‘imagined community’.  

2. Weber’s concepts of honour and nation

In 1892 after a tour de force of incessant work Max Weber published his first book about contemporary agrarian matters. Here we find for the first time in his oeuvre the word ‘status honour’ (Standesehre) — not referring to the Junkers, as one might expect, but to their tenants (Instleute) who, apart from their work for their respective squires’ estates worked their own small farms and of whom he expected they might adopt the idea of the farmers’ traditional status honour. Two years later, 1894, one year before he gave his famous Freiburg inaugural lecture, he discussed ‘the formation of a uniform class of stock exchange traders defined by general social background, upbringing, education and experience’, and ‘a uniform concept of honour’. Weber imagined they might be ‘in a position to recruit “honour courts” from their own membership which would then have the energy to have an educational influence and whose verdicts would be respected’. Admittedly, he was aware of the illusion-

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13. See n. 12.

14. I refer mainly to my articles ‘Weber’s Theory of the Nation’, in Leoussi and Smith, Encyclopedia of Nationalism, pp. 294-98; and ‘Max Webers Nationenbegriff’ (see n. 3).


16. See Max Weber, ‘Die Börse. I. Zweck und äußere Organisation’ (1894), in Max Weber, Börsenwesen. Schriften und Reden 1893–1898 (ed. Knut Borchardt and Cornelia Meyer-Stoll; MWG I/5.1; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1999), p. 171. The honour courts were regarded as an institution that was able to establish rules for the honest civil or professional conduct of a person. They could, e.g., mediate, and they could judge whether one had damaged his own honour or the reputation or business of another person by an insult or by an unfair or careless transaction. Their verdict could repair the damaged honour or declare a person dishonourable. The latter might destroy his civil existence.
ary aspects of that idea: the respective social group was by far too heterogeneous for a shared sense of honour.\textsuperscript{17} So far Weber’s earliest remarks on how social groups, group ethos and social honour correlate with the achievements of this honour for the respective groups and the whole polity. One should note here that Weber talked, first about rural tenants and, secondly about stock exchange traders, merchants. The status of these groups was quite different from Weber’s. They lacked the right and the duty to defend their honour by fighting duels, quite in contrast to the social and political elite of the Kaiserreich, who consisted of the educated middle-class,\textsuperscript{18} the aristocracy and the officers’ corps. For this latter status group the Satisfaktionsfähigkeit was common. That is, they could demand and give ‘satisfaction’ by fighting ritualized life-and-death-duels. In many respects Max Weber shared that mentality. Admittedly, he never actually fought a duel, but—to speak only of the time between 1911 and 1914, when he worked on Economy and Society with its famous chapter on class, status, party,\textsuperscript{19} which is central to Weber’s understanding of the social ties of ‘honour’—he was at least on two occasions ready to take the risk.\textsuperscript{20}

At this point we should return to our discussion about the scientific and political correlation of honour and nation in Weber’s thinking. His earliest substantial remarks about the ‘nation’ can be found in his famous

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. the first part (‘Organisation und Rechtsstellung der Börsen’, 1894) of Weber’s series of articles about the results of the German survey on stock exchange (\textit{Die Ergebnisse der deutschen Börsenенquete}, 1894–1896), MWG I/5, pp. 175-550 (266).

\textsuperscript{18} The German term for this group is Bildungsbürgertum. ‘The enigmatic character of the Bildungsbürgertum is not only determined by origins, occupation, political and religious views, income situation and property; rather it is shaped by a sociality which is defined primarily by another characteristic, namely a commonality grounded in education whatever all other differences. The specific prestige which is thereby obtained is defined from within by convention and successfully claimed to the world. From this characteristic stems the equality within the group and the exclusivity from the world. The claim to special social prestige is legitimized by the assumed representation of values and behavioural orientations that may claim general social significance. The standards of their own life-conduct are considered to be exemplary; analogously to ‘noblesse oblige’ it is ‘education demands’. M. Rainer Lepsius, ‘Das Bildungsbürgertum als ständische Vergesellschaftung’, in \textit{idem}, \textit{Demokratie in Deutschland. Soziologisch-historische Konstellationsanalysen} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), pp. 303-14.

\textsuperscript{19} ES (see n. 6), esp. II, p. 932.

\textsuperscript{20} Max Weber’s letters 1911–14 show his demands for duels, when he felt that somebody had hurt the honour of his wife or of his publisher Paul Siebeck. See Max Weber, \textit{Briefe 1910–1911} and \textit{idem, Briefe 1913–1914} (ed. M. Rainer Lepsius, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Birgit Rudhard and Manfred Schön; MWG II/7 and MWG II/8; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1998 and 2003).
inaugural lecture in Freiburg 1895 about the nation state and economic policy.\footnote{Max Weber, ‘Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik. Akademische Antrittsrede’, in MWG I/4 (cf. n. 9), pp. 543-74. English translation in Lassman and Speirs (cf. n. 1).} As a German ‘economic theorist’ (volkswirtschaftlicher Theoretiker), he declared, he had no other standards than German ones,\footnote{MWG I/4, p. 560.} his science was bound to ‘the particular strain of humankind (Menschentum) we find within our own nature’,\footnote{Quotation follows Lassman and Speirs, p. 15.} and his main task as an economist, and that of his colleagues, did not consist in providing the coming generations with peace and happiness, but with ‘the eternal struggle to preserve and raise the quality of our national species’.\footnote{Lassman and Speirs, p. 16.} No doubt, these seemingly naturalistic, emotional and partly irrational considerations had their equivalents in the thinking of the middle-class elites of all European Great Powers.

Nevertheless, he only explained what his nation meant to him, but he did not then explain the meaning of the term itself. It was at the second meeting of the German Sociological Association in October 1912 and at a time when he was already working on his opus magnum ‘Economy and Society’,\footnote{The chapter about ‘structures of power’ in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul [Reprints], 1948), combines some pages from Economy and Society with a few pages drawn from Max Weber’s spontaneous oral contribution to the meeting.} that for the first time Weber spontaneously outlined his sociological reflections on the nation: ‘In so far as there is at all a common object lying behind the obviously ambiguous term “nation”, it is apparently located in the field of politics. One might well define the concept of nation in the following way: a nation is a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own.’\footnote{Gerth and Wright Mills (eds.), From Max Weber, p. 176.} The contrast between Weber’s community of sentiment and Jellinek’s notion of the nation as a special content of consciousness\footnote{See above, p. 224.} shows quite clearly the specific categorical quality of the emotions in Weber’s political thinking. In other words, if one shortens that sentence and, in accordance with Weber’s intentions, replaces the ‘state of its own’ by nation-state the characteristic of the nation as a community of sentiment will remain, but what else? ‘The characteristic of a nation is its striving for a nation-state’ — or, the making of a nation precedes the making of the respective nation-state.\footnote{Cf. B. Anderson’s (see n. 12) opposite position, according to which the exis-}
So, what is a nation? And how does it emerge? Weber raises these questions in *Economy and Society*. After he had failed to identify empirical qualities—such as culture, ethnicity, language, religion—that are common to those who constitute the members of a nation, there was nearly nothing left but the trivial observation that common social action was a prerequisite of the national community on its way to the political community. Following this line of argument, the nation was—in spite of Weber’s eloquence—beyond any proper definition: ‘the concept undoubtedly means, above all, that it is proper to expect from certain groups a specific sentiment of solidarity in the face of other groups. Thus, the concept belongs in the sphere of values.’ According to Weber’s lifelong estimation of the nation as a supreme value this assignation to the value sphere transforms the understanding of the nation into a believed political entity, a power structure consisting in the thinking, feeling, and talking of people.

Consequently, he tried to identify distinct types of contemporary nations. But the sheer multitude of different realities resisted his attempts to give a consistent definition or even to elaborate an ideal type of the nation. Nevertheless, we owe to him the observation that, to the extent to which a nation is also a political community—a national state—all such nations have three features in common, namely, the use of force, the desire for power prestige and the readiness—or obligation—of their members to face death in the common interest. ‘On the basis of this power, the members [of those political structures] may pretend to a special “prestige”, and their pretensions may influence the external conduct of the power structure’—and finally may play a part in the origin of wars. The ‘pure “prestige of power”’, means in practice ‘the “honour of power” over other communities, the expansion of power’.

3. *The meaning of honour in Weber’s concept of the nation*

Obviously Weber’s pre-war thoughts about the correlation of state and nation with prestige and glory of power, that is with one type of honour, tence of the ‘dynastic’ states and empires appears as a precondition of the modern nation-building process.

29. The search for those qualities of the nations takes two extensive chapters of ES (cf. n. 6), that is I, pp. 385-89; II, pp. 901-40.
are summarized in these quotations from *Economy and Society*. As shown by his letters, Weber was, up to the summer of 1914, totally absorbed by his *opus magnum*, and, therefore, he was totally unaware of the signs of the coming war. But immediately after the outbreak of the war he put away that work and reported to the army to do his duty for his country. He was detached to help organize and administer the military reserve hospitals in the Heidelberg area. At Christmas 1914 he addressed his inpatients in a speech. All of them knew the reality of the war, and they knew they had to leave for the battlefield soon after recovering. The way he dealt with his violent emotions which were caused by the wounded soldiers’ plight reflected his martial disposition and his gallant temperament. Listen to a few lines from this speech which have been preserved in the *Lebensbild*.

A hero’s death for the freedom and honour of our people is a supreme achievement that will affect our children and children’s children. There is no greater glory, no worthier end than to die this way. And to many death gives a perfection that life would have denied him.

*A hero’s death, freedom, and honour of our people* — that is, in a nutshell, the meaning of honour in Weber’s concept of the nation. This makes clear that Weber’s use of the term *honour* like that of *nation* belongs to the sphere of values: *without saying so he demonstrates that the term veils a sense of status and power aspirations and simultaneously lifts them to the highest moral level*. This is what we should keep in mind when we see him — as he repeatedly does — declare the war, in a variety of highly emotional terms, to be a war for his country’s honour.

Admittedly, this looks somewhat narrow-minded. But Weber did not monopolize the honour of a country for Germany. Instead, he more than once analysed the sheer weight of honour as one reason of war on the part of Germany’s enemies. As he wrote in the late autumn of 1915, the feeling of honour prevented the French nation from accepting the separation of Alsace from France by Germany in 1871 as long as the major part of the Alsatian people resented it, and, additionally, he noted in the


same article, France and England were, by reasons of their security and honour, inwardly prohibited from accepting any kind of affiliation of Belgium with Germany. True, this is no new answer to the question about the essence of honour, but it is some preliminary information about the relation between honour and national politics. As Weber expressed it in February 1916: honour, that means, ‘simply, commitment to the historical obligations imposed on one’s own nation by fate’. But what was imposed on Germany? In the end it was the observance of her raison d’état: ‘A people of seventy millions, situated between those imperialistic powers, was obliged to be a power state. We had to be a power state and, in order to be involved in decisions on the future of the earth, we had to risk this war, even if we had to fear defeat. And we had to risk this war, because it would have brought disgrace on us in the eyes of our contemporaries and posterity, if we in a cowardly and idle way had eluded this duty. It was demanded from us by the honour of our people. Our honour is at stake...in this German war.’ After this—and some more phrases of the same type—it might appear that the essence of Weber’s understanding of a nation’s honour consists in the reasonable pursuit of the nation state’s raison d’état, and likewise of the respect for the honour of the other states. Obviously there are analogies to the status honour of those persons who were regarded as being capable of giving ‘satisfaction’ (satisfaktionsfähig) and who were ready to fight duels in order to defend or to restore their honour.

Max Weber experienced the German military breakdown in 1918, the armistice, the socialist and democratic revolution, the course of the peace negotiations and the territorial losses of the Reich as a series of personal catastrophes. In a letter of November 1918 he complained to his mother about what had happened to ‘our honour’. In an article of January 1919 he indirectly accused France of proceeding in Versailles about the questions of the post war order and of war guilt without dignity.

meant, at least for Weber, that German honour was deeply wounded by the post-war situation. This is the context of Weber’s sentence in ‘Politics as a Vocation’: ‘A nation will forgive damage to its interests, but not injury to its honour, and certainly not when this is done in a spirit of priggish self-righteousness. For every new document which may emerge decades afterwards will stir up the undignified squabble, all the hatred and anger, once again, whereas the war ought at least to be buried morally when it comes to an end.’42

On the eve of the First World War Weber wrote in the chapter on ‘Class, Status, Party’ of Economy and Society about status groups and status situation, which he described as follows: ‘every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour’.43 The corresponding post-war paragraph about ‘Status and Status Group (Stand)’ was written about one year after the Speech on ‘Politics as a Vocation’. It runs as follows: ‘“Status” (Ständische Lage) shall mean an effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges’,44 and much else, but nothing related to the concept of honour.

43. ES II, p. 932.
44. ES I, p. 305.