

“Max Weber on the Constitutive Qualities of Politics”
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Working Structure

1. conflict and meaning
2. incommensurable principles
3. value stands (as ultimate and formally groundless)
 - the criterion of decision (i.e. the necessity of taking a stand) in politics subordinates putatively value-free rational criteria
 - policy formation in this way has political ends
4. decision as key to resolution
 - tragedy
 - connection to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, et al.
5. theoretical implications

Introduction

Conflict (*Kampf*) is the essence of politics – or so claims Max Weber ([1968] 1978: 38-40, 1399, 1414). Conflict emerges over such matters as the definition of situations, priority of values, ends to be realized, and means used to achieve given ends. Conflict is a constitutive element of social life ramifying through the several domains of action which condition and give rise to its particular instantiations. In this way, conflict is present in the domains of religion, science, economy, ethics, etc. The view of conflict as the essence of politics cannot be said, unfortunately, to be the guiding light in debates concerning the social-theoretical or political relevance of Weber’s thought. Concern with Weber’s understanding of conflict as the constitutive principle of politics *as such* is typically overshadowed by emphasis on complementary albeit important phenomena such as power, legitimacy, and dominance.

This article illuminates Weber’s view of conflict and identifies essential principles Weber posits as giving rise to it. Specification of these principles offers both a clearer understanding of the defining qualities of the political sphere and – perhaps more significantly – throws into sharp relief the limits of rationality for the resolution of conflict. The arguments advanced here are grounded in a systematic analysis of a nodal concept in Weber’s analytical framework that has received scant attention: the concept of presupposition (*Voraussetzung*). More than three dozen primary works have been analyzed in this study, and Weber’s usage of this concept has been found not only to be consistent with and complementary to other facets of his thought but also to illuminate them. Detailed specification of Weber’s presuppositional framework has been made elsewhere with a focus on its epistemological and methodological dimensions ([author citation deleted]). This article focuses on normative and theoretical implications of Weber’s claims.

Meaning and Conflict

The claim that conflict is the essence of politics is a deceptively simple one, a claim the apparently self-evident nature of which may outshine a key social theoretical insight: conflict – and, therefore, politics – is essentially meaningful; or, put differently, conflict – and, therefore, politics – is constituted by subjective meanings. In Weber’s conception, action qua action is behavior manifesting a subjectively meaningful dimension, and it is to be distinguished sharply from mere motion, reactive behavior, or psychophysical processes such as fatigue, habituation, states of

euphoria, etc. (1978: 3-62). The concept of meaning refers to principles of orientation that may be identified by their essentially conventional and law- or rule-based aspects and which are intelligible as part of broader complexes or contexts of such principles. The relevant analytical objects of cognition for Weber are “subjective meaning-complex[es] of action” (1978: 13). Seen by these lights, politics hence is oriented to principles the subjective meaning of which qualitatively constitute action.

Conflict is said to arise when an actor seeks to realize his will in the face of resistance from another party (1978: 39). Firstly, the object of will is meaningfully constituted. Secondly, the resistance met in carrying out one’s will is meaningfully driven. Weber conceives of conflict in its sociological aspect as resting on a relationship between actors in which each actor in a plurality of actors “takes account of [the meaningful action] of the others and is oriented in these terms” (1978: 26-28). Simply put, actors in a state of conflict appear to recognize their competing wills, and it is the meaningful content of this state that is of sociological interest. It is the putative maxims or ends tied to will that are seen as constitutive. The question of the means used in the resistance of other parties in the realization of one’s will is an altogether separate matter. Means may be “peaceful” in that conflict is played out according to the principles of a meaningful order (i.e. regulated competition), or they may involve physical violence (which itself may be carried out without respect to rules or be oriented to strict convention as in the chivalric battles of medieval Europe; 1978: 38).

Foregrounding the meaningful facet of politics makes clearer Weber’s claim on the first page of his canonical essay “Politics as a Vocation” that the concept of politics comprises “every kind of independent *leadership* activity” ([1919] 2008: 309; Weber’s emphasis). Leadership occurs with respect to the end or the maxim shaping one’s conduct. A prudent wife, as Weber notes, may demonstrate leadership in guiding her husband, and a trade union may demonstrate leadership in determining a strike policy (77). As it concerns leadership with respect to a state, the end or maxim concerns to whom (e.g. a group or another state) power will be distributed. In these and all cases of leadership the end or maxim is determined by the act of deciding upon one among the various equities or interests – which are themselves meaningfully constituted and not as it were naturally given ([1922-1923] 1946; see also Eastwood 2005) – a situation presents. The act of deciding is key: it is the locus of independence in leadership and the manner by which conflict is resolved.

So as to further the appreciation of this last statement, let us turn to a discussion of the kinds of conflicts Weber has in mind.

Incommensurable Principles

Although Weber’s methodological discussions foreground understanding instances of conflict in which an actor’s will is resisted by other parties (1978: 38), his claims concerning conflicts of the actor’s own will are more theoretically illuminating. To begin with, Weber’s fundamental empirical proposition is that action is conditioned by various “value-spheres” or the synonymous “life-orders” (Rel. Rej. [1915] 1944: 323-359). He means by this that among the meaning-complexes to which action may be oriented some manifest an inner logic and their organizing principles suggest an autonomy vis-à-vis other complexes. The inner logic of science (*Wissenschaft*), for example, entails the presuppositions that concepts, rules of logic and method, and experiments are valid and that what yielded or discovered by science is seen as “worth being known” ([1917]1946: 134-144). The autonomy of science is tied to this inner logic and thereby renders such phenomena as revelations as effectively meaningless in terms of their implications for science qua science; put another way, were science to take a revelation as presupposition constituting its inner logic, it would be regarded as another meaning-complex. The limit of science’s autonomy is reached when the questions move beyond those concerning description or the technical mastery of life towards questions of ends or how one ought to live. An example of this may be seen in the “practical technology” of medicine.

Weber notes that while medicine's inner logic sets it the task of "maintaining life as such and of diminishing suffering as such to the greatest possible degree" the limits of its autonomy are reached when the question of "Whether life is worth while living and when" is posed ([1917]1946: 144). Among the value-spheres Weber recognizes are the religious, political, economic, esthetic, erotic, and intellectual ([1915]1946: 323-359). Weber's descriptions of the autonomy of these spheres echoes Soren Kierkegaard's claims in *Either/Or* regarding the fundamental tension in which the esthetic and ethical spheres stand. [inner logic] + [autonomy]. [Show how these examples are autonomous and may constitute conflict. Autonomy does not determine conflict, but it affords it. Maybe refer to esthetic/ethical in Kierkegaard?]. [Maybe transition to discussion of presuppositions of thought and how they condition values?]

Although conflict may result in direct coercion or force, it is not to be confused or equated with it. The use of direct coercion or force is, as Weber sees it, a means, and such use suggests nothing about the nature or significance of any sought-after ends.

Weber's view of politics in this way is not grounded in a view of a putative natural law or any such other absolute meaningful foundation, and it equally is not grounded in a view of economic or power contests as being original. Regarding the former point, conflict over values concerns the determination of the sets of organizing principles seen as providing a relevant standard or measure of the worth of some phenomenon. Weber sees such determination as an empirical matter – as an act of deciding. Regarding the latter, economic and power contests are conceived of as being conditioned and animated by meaningful orientations (e.g. "ideas" or "world images").

Conceiving of conflict as the constitutive quality of politics capacitates knowledge not only of the nature of the links between political ends and the policies and ethics [the ethic of conviction is decisionistic; the ethic of responsibility assumes a stand has been taken] that afford their realization but also of the relation between politics and other dimensions of society.

The resolution of conflict, however, is decisively groundless; what this means is that in a situation of conflict... .