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**RE-READING WEBER, OR:
THE THREE FIELDS FOR THE ANALYSIS
OF POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

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Abstract

The paper argues that power analysis is at the crossroads of three different fields which follow a certain autonomous logic. First, there is a field of political theory which is concerned with the nature of the 'polity' in which questions of the organisation of (organised) violence and of the common good, as well as questions of freedom, are paramount. It is where power stands for 'government' or 'governance' and political order, as well as personal 'autonomy'. The logic in the field of explanatory theories is to think power in terms of a theory of action mainly and a theory of domination subsequently. Here, power is searched for the explanation of behaviour and the outcomes of social action. It is here where power is thought in terms of 'agency', 'influence' or prevalence, if not 'cause'. In the praxeological field, politics is the 'art of the possible' in which collective violence is not antithetical but fundamental to politics. Power is furthermore connected to the idea of state sovereignty and the discourse of the reason of state, including an ethics of responsibility. The three fields are exemplified by Weber's analysis of power which came at a time when all three logics had acquired a sufficient independence of each other, and yet still stood relatively connected. (Words: 13984)

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Introduction

In his famous study of power, Bertrand de Jouvenel analysed the increasing scope of ‘power’ in Western societies. In a liberal vein close to Benjamin Constant, he traced how government has widened and encroached into spheres of the polity/society previously outside its reach.¹ In this account, the very phenomenon of power is intrinsically linked to the definition of a modern polity, its social order. ‘Power’ is the name of the locus of government, if not synonymous with it, while the political enterprise is the fight both for ‘taking power’ and for defining its limits. Others, pushing this position further, the fight for power is ubiquitous and such ubiquity, in turn, derives either from Human Nature or, in a more Hobbesian vision, from fear and scarcity. In other words, in modern political theory, and in varying versions, ‘power’ can be seen to permeate our very understanding of the human as political being, the origins of political action, the political aim of order and security from fear, and the locus of government. It is not too far-fetched to state that such an inter-related phenomenon of ‘power’ is at the heart of, if not defining, much of modern political theory, at least from Machiavelli to Foucault.

And yet at the same time, Robert Dahl could write and claim that little systematic work on ‘power’ had been done before the 1950s.² Granted, the behavioural moment was not exactly immune to grandiose statements about its own scientific superiority. One could look back and see this as just another embarrassing hyperbole, by now gracefully forgotten. And yet, there is a sense in which Dahl was justified. Dahl defines ‘power’ as to get an actor to do something which he/she would not have otherwise done. It is an explicitly causal concept in which power becomes the central variable for understanding outcomes of social interaction. Needless to say that this conception of power is connected to the above-mentioned facets of power in political theory. It derives from the question of ‘who governs?’ And yet, in typical ‘operational’ manner, it tries to assess that locus of power by a carefully conceived analysis of something which is empirically accessible. So, power is understood through the study of the outcome of (government-) decisions, that is, which (public) actors prevailed in different policy domains. By aggregating those decisions and domains, we would finally be able to nail the conundrum of ‘who governs?’ Such an approach is still considered so important, that Dahl was presenting a ‘50 years after’ at the 2006 APSA Convention dedicated to the analysis of power.

¹ Jouvenel 1972.

² This claim can be found in different versions in Dahl 1958, 1961, 1968.

As so often with such choices, however, this restricted focus guaranteed a better controlled empirical analysis, only at the price of misrepresenting or misunderstanding why modern political theory was interested in power in the first place. In a sense, it works by taking for granted what needs to be explained: the role of government in producing social order, or, more generally, the origins of order. Power becomes reduced to a technical issue which institutional engineering could address. Hence, despite being about 'government' and about 'power' for understanding the nature of our polities, the two approaches do not share the same cognitive interest: whereas Jouvanel looked for the role of power in our society, Dahl used 'power' in an individualist (and causal) theory of action to which the understanding of 'who governs?' was reduced.

My contention is that, just like in this case, our understanding and analysis of power inevitably trade on different logics. Yet observers are not always aware of them, neither of their difference, nor, finally, of the inherent difficulties in reducing one to the other, as e.g. Dahl proposed to do. Indeed, to be more precise, my claim is that at the present stage of the analysis of power in the social sciences, and in particular in International Relations, it would be fruitful to distinguish three 'fields' within which power is understood with different underlying logics: the field of political theory proper, the field of explanatory social theory, and the field of political practice. Practitioners in those fields need and use different concepts of power; they aim at different analyses of power.

Drawing on the implications of such a distinction is important for two reasons. For one, it is important to understand that a step forward in one field is not necessarily a step forward in another. It is neither self-evident that a better explanatory theory of power will resolve the philosophical problems which political theory attaches to 'power', nor is a better philosophical solution able to capture what many social theorists are interested in when they talk about 'power'. Second, some of the perennial debates about power have to do with the way the logic of any one of the fields intrudes into another. When Steven Lukes opposes power to structure³, for instance, he thinks of power in terms of (personal) autonomy in democratic theory. The logic in which this debate is inscribed is philosophical or ethical. This is not the same aim many scholars in social theory have in mind, who wish to understand the actual production of hierarchy, order or social discipline, often trying to clean such concepts of their wider normative associations. And there, the logic of the debate is different: scholars are looking for re-definitions of 'power' since they are not persuaded by the prevailing reduction of the understanding of political order to the authority to give orders (Weber's *Befehlsgewalt*). Instead, some try to capture those 'impersonal' forces and

³ Lukes 1977.

dispositions attached to shared practices or structures which permeate a society, as for instance, in the work of Bourdieu. Thinking about democracy in the philosophical logic of an individual's autonomy or freedom does not really meet such a conceptualisation of power as explanatory variable, then attached to the structural level. Hence, for Lukes, (political) power and (social) structure cannot or indeed should not meet, but for Bourdieu the first is not thinkable without the second.⁴

Well, if so, why not just acknowledge the different fields, keep them separate, and go on independently within each field? Although this is to some extent possible, such a strategy is ultimately doomed: the link can simply not be avoided. Our power concepts in explanatory theory, be it a social theory of action or of domination, cannot be divorced from the understanding of agency, of free will, interest, or indeed 'politics', all crucial in political theory. Similarly, the way practitioners talk and think about 'power' is consequential, and not just epiphenomenal, for that very social reality explanatory theory is looking at. In 'power', I would claim, a social world of autonomy and political order meets a social world of agency and influence, and a social world of practical responsibility. None of the three logics is entirely autonomous of the others.⁵

And hence all that great difficulty of power analysis is perhaps linked to the extraordinary task to think power in the different logics of those three social domains simultaneously. It is only understandable that scholars have tried to stay within one single logic at a time. Indeed, it is necessary to advance more coherent thought. And this has been much of the story of power analysis in the last 50 years. But the separation of political theory, science and practice, anyway never a total divorce, has consummated its analytical potential. Some of the present blind alleys of power analysis are but the effect of reducing power to something analytically feasible in one field and yet still wishing to retain a wider resonance across fields, without engaging in a proper translation from and to the different logics at hand. Some of the sometimes defensive-aggressive pleas from political practice insist on the specificity of the 'language of power (and interest)' just as if no further normative or scientific justification were needed. It is the contention of this paper, that to further the present debate, the logics must be clearly delineated and put side by

⁴ Similarly, Lukes recent treatment of Foucault reads the latter almost entirely from such concerns of autonomy, which, although not wrong in itself, replaces Foucault's argument in a logic different of his own (but then Foucault fits many boxes at the same time, or none). See Lukes 2004, pp. 88ff.

⁵ It is not fortuitous that power or other similar central concepts, function as central links between the fields: they are needed to talk and make theory, science and practice.

side, their interferences cautiously probed. Indeed, this is what seems at the origin of the present renewal of interest in ‘power’.

The present paper makes a first case for this argument.⁶ It will do so with a view at earlier days of power analysis. More precisely, it will look at Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of power analysis who has played a pivotal role in this story. He comes at the end of a time where the three fields were not yet so clearly distinguished, where the different logics had not yet developed to such a degree. At the same time, he comes also at the start of this separation and specialisation, being the inspiration of many power definitions afterwards, Dahl’s not the least. Sometimes, it seems as if the practitioners of the three fields could still meet in Weber, as it were, as if he succeeded in proposing a social theory of power which still keeps its relationship to the field of political theory and political practice. All refer back to him and claim him to be one of theirs. The challenge today is to think how, with all the advances and changes the three fields have gone through, such a meeting should best look like anew. But that is part of a wider project beyond this paper. The present paper aims at presenting the different levels and logics of ‘power’. A first section introduces into the idea of fields, specifying one which is the perhaps unexpected, in more detail, and a second section elucidates them in Weber’s work.

I. Fields of power analysis

The analysis of power seems to elude single dimensions. The number of distinctions applied to the concept and analysis of power is mind-boggling. There is, just to name a few, the evergreen of ‘power-over’ to be distinguished from ‘power-to’, as well as the similar but not equal distinction between ‘pouvoir’ (potestas) and ‘puissance’ (potentia), all distinctions applicable to the concept itself, as it were. Then, there are the distinctions between different types of power concepts, including e.g. power and authority⁷, or power and domination⁸. Then, power is often distinguished by pointing to a specific opposite, which can be powerlessness⁹, oppression, ‘structure’¹⁰, or a type of complete social anomie (e.g. the work of Foucault can be read this way).

⁶ It represents one of the inspirations for my research on a book entitled ‘Power and International Relations’, forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

⁷ e.g. Lukes 1979.

⁸ e.g. Miller 1987.

⁹ e.g. Gaventa 1980.

¹⁰ e.g. Lukes 1977.

Finally, and moving to the actual analysis of power, probably all of us have heard by now about Lukes' three 'dimensions' of power, that is, power that exists by directly imposing one's interest, by indirectly setting the agenda to further it and by making the other believe in a different interest, than his own.¹¹

The present study will obviously draw on such distinctions here and there, but it aims at another level. Already Peter Morriss tried to cut through the endless power debates by delimiting the different purposes for and contexts in which we use the concept of power.¹² Much sterile debate could be avoided, so he argued, if we only made clear the specific context of its use. What makes sense in some context does not necessarily in another. Also, not all power concepts are relevant to all contexts. He distinguished between a practical context in which we are interested what we can do or what can be done to (and for) us; a moral context which assesses responsibility, and an evaluative context, which judges the overall distribution of power in a society. He also explicitly excluded some others for not making much sense, such as the scientific context, since power statements '*summarise* observations; they do not *explain* them.'¹³

In a similar manner, this paper tries to show that the analysis of power is best done while distinguishing three fields because they follow different logics. Yet my aim is not philosophical in Morriss' analytical sense (as important as this is): I do not wish to delimit philosophically coherent contexts for power concepts and analysis. Hence, I cannot exclude the 'scientific context', simply because it might be incoherent with regard to a certain conception of power. If practitioners of science prominently use 'power', it is part of a social field that needs to be studied. This might well be, just as Morriss insinuates, because political theory has told us that 'power' is a central concept and so social scientists will be induced to use it as a central variable – whether or not it can function as such. This is, in fact, my point. The very attempt to turn power into a causal concept, as proposed by Dahl, is linked to the logic of the field of the social scientist into which the concept of power is accommodated. As long as the field of explanatory theory has such a disposition, our understanding of and debate about power will be marked by it – also in the other fields.

Hence, I try to approach the different contexts of power analysis rather in terms of the prominent role power plays in the understanding and indeed self-understanding of practitioners

¹¹ Lukes 2004.

¹² Morriss 2002 [1987].

¹³ For the general argument, see Morriss 2002 [1987], chapter 6. The quote is at p. 44 (original emphasis). This is connected to the intrinsic qualities of dispositional concepts, as opposed to causal ones.

in the fields of political theory, social sciences and political practice, in particular in International Relations. In my approach, I will start from three different *communities* for whom the understanding of power has been a central issue, not analytically coherent *contexts*. For the sake of clearer distinguishing this from Morriss' 'contexts', I call them 'fields' of power analysis: the fields of political theory, explanatory social science, and (IR) practice.

It is crucial to stress from the start that I assume that in all three fields, power seems intrinsically connected both to the very definition and the understanding of 'politics', yet differently defined. In some sense, power and politics are concepts that move together. But the way they do is affected by the logic of fields and then also by the positions taken therein. The logic of power analysis in the field of political theory, as I understand it here, is to think about the nature of the 'polity' in which questions of the organisation of (organised) violence and of the common good, as well as questions of freedom, are paramount. It is where power stands for 'government' or 'governance' and political order, as well as personal 'autonomy'. The logic in the field of explanatory theories is to think power in terms of a theory of action mainly and a theory of domination subsequently. Here, power is searched for the explanation of behaviour and the outcomes of social action. It is here where power is thought in terms of agency, influence or prevalence, if not cause. As one can see, these two fields are not the same as the other distinctions like 'power-to' and 'power-over' or *potestas/potentia*; these distinctions appear in both of the fields, but in slightly different disguises.

But then, what is the field of 'political practice'? Is this not a completely different animal? The other two fields refer to well established 'disciplines' where power is part of an academic discourse. Is this not qualitatively different from the discourse of IR practice? If I had defined the fields of power analysis in terms of such disciplinary logics, the objection would be justified. But the fields refer to social fields of practice where different types of practitioners grapple with 'power' in their respective life-world. Also, insisting in a qualitative difference between the first two and this one would quickly deteriorate into the stale debate about 'theory here and practice there'. For my concern, all three fields are fields of practice on the basis of some theories. What is central for me is that in all three fields, the practitioners claim a special knowledge about 'power'. In the field of political theory, it is based on contemplation and normative analysis; in the field of explanatory social science, it is based on experimental logic (hypothesis testing); and in the field of political practice it is based on historical experience and the maxims derived from it. It is my

assumption that the understanding of power in International Relations is at the crossroad of these three fields and their knowledge claims.¹⁴

Well, even if granted that one can see the field of IR political practice as of the same kind than the other two: what is the 'logic' of power analysis therein? As mentioned above, whereas the other two fields refer to normative analysis and experiment as the logics of their fields, the field of practice is based upon practical or 'historical experience'. Or, at least, this is the way the field of IR practitioners has always defended its claim to superior knowledge from outside intruders. Neither normative nor experimental analysis is considered at the height of this knowledge derived from experience.

Friedrich Meinecke, a contemporary of Weber, will be my witness for this argument. In his treatise on 'the reason of state in the newer History', Meinecke goes as far as to claim an elective affinity between the work of the (international) statesman and the (modern) historian.¹⁵ Similar to thinkers of the reason of state, from Machiavelli onwards, History should be studied with the history of ideas as integral part to it, and yet a history of ideas of sorts. For that history of ideas should not be conceived in terms of a clean but sterile history of dogmas. Rather, it should distill ideas out of the actually experienced ('die Verwandlung des Erlebten in Ideen') as seen through the eyes of the political movers.

Indeed, the modern historian and the statesman in the tradition of the reason of state (should) use the same empirical methodology. In his opening page already, Meinecke writes that, strictly speaking, there is only one ideal way for state action, one ideal reason of state. 'To recognise this is the burning endeavour of the acting statesman, as well as of the historian looking back.'¹⁶ During the times, when, according to Meinecke, historiography was still under the spell of natural law and its concern with the ideal state, the discourse on the reason of state taught already how to think (and make) History as 'practical History'. And here the parallel in terms of thinking *Staatskunst* and History comes to the fore:

¹⁴ But then, if so, is it really as divided: cannot practitioners in any of them follow more than one logic? Is it possible to imagine some 'Trojan Horses' who have introduced other logics into the fields in which they operate? Yes. And precisely this is the basis for my argument and the problematique I wish to raise: what happens if they do?

¹⁵ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], pp. 22-25.

¹⁶ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 1: 'Sie zu erkennen ist das heiÙe Bemühen des handelnden Staatsmannes wie des rückschauenden Historikers.'

Acting according to the reason of state reached relatively early a way of seeing and understanding which was akin to modern historical cognition. Modern historical cognition, in turn, profited also from the reason of state, from the attraction that emanated from the teaching of the interests of states, which was used as auxiliary practical science for the 'art of government' since the 17th century by those involved in the latter.¹⁷

If the reason of state is a privileged partner for establishing an empirical methodology for the history of ideas, such history also becomes the distilled essence and sedimented knowledge for the art of government. Statesmen and the modern historians blend into each other in the quest for understanding states and their interests in the motion of world history.¹⁸ The result is not universal knowledge, but practical 'maxims', which is the way Meinecke defined the reason of state.

As Meinecke shows, power is central for this idea of a reason of state. It is intrinsically connected to the science (*Lehre*) of state interests (understood through its power position) and of the international balance of power politics. This utilitarian understanding of politics about means and ends replaces the classical Aristotelian concern with the best government or the common good. Consequently also a different morality applies to this 'politics' so redefined, in which certain situations demand of necessity the trespassing of usual moral and legal norms *by the statesman*. Indeed, good statesmanship is defined by this practical knowledge for artful trespassing in the interest/reason of the state. It is not fortuitous that Meinecke stresses the need to look at the reason of state through the eyes of the practitioner. Nor that he sees the emergence of this discourse as parallel to the emergence of modern diplomacy during the Renaissance.¹⁹ It is the

¹⁷ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], pp. 22-23: 'Das Handeln nach Staatsräson gelangte also verhältnismäßig früh zu einer Art des Sehens und Erkennens, die dem modernen historischen Erkennen schon verwandt war. Das moderne historische Erkennen aber profitierte deshalb auch wieder von der Staatsräson, von ihrer Ausstrahlung in der Lehre von den Interessen der Staaten, die seit dem 17. Jahrhundert von solchen, die der Staatskunst nahestanden, als praktische Hilfswissenschaft derselben gepflegt wurde.'

¹⁸ See also Meinecke's argument that the German Historical School after Ranke created a 'historical realism' not based on scholastic opinion (*Schulmeinung*), but on real forces (*reale Kräfte*). That programme was then understood by few, but realised by Bismarck and so became 'through Ranke the fundament of all real historical thinking and through Bismarck the fundament of all independent (*unbefangen*) political thinking.' Meinecke 1916, p. 4.

¹⁹ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 176.

language of diplomatic practice as it evolved over time. As Jutta Weldes remarks elsewhere, the language of the national interest is the language of IR practice.²⁰

Whereas power was akin to autonomy and political order for the political theorist, or agency, cause and domination for the explanatory theorist, it will have other connotations and family resemblances for the practitioner of the reason of state. Politics appears still as defined through power, but not ‘power as government’. Rather, to use Bismarck’s terms, politics is the ‘art of the possible’ in which collective violence is not antithetical but fundamental to politics. Moreover, power is crucial for the understanding of *Staatsnotwendigkeit* (necessity of state) and what possibility, or ‘potential’ power, there is for a state to affect it. Power is furthermore connected to the idea of state sovereignty in different ways. On the one hand, it refers to the recognition of ‘agent-hood’ connected to the control (power over) territory and people. On the other, more Schmittian sense, it refers to this final and sovereign decision where to exceptionally trespass moral or legal norms in the higher common interest, a decision which can not be taken away from, and indeed might define, the statesman. Finally, power is defined in connection with a special morality, namely this very special responsibility that befalls on political leaders to use the reason of state correctly.

Now, it is no difficult argument to see in the reason of state, i.e. in its empirical epistemology, its utilitarian or rationalist definition of politics and in its practical maxims, including balance of power politics²¹, a forerunner of (many) realist theories in International Relations. Yet, it is first and foremost that practical knowledge, precisely not yet the attempt to turn it into a social science. Meinecke is very explicit that a purely empirical and utilitarian study of the reason of state is necessarily limited and general catalogues for the ideal behaviour of states not possible.²² He ridicules the attempt to understand politics like ‘clock mechanics’ (and reads Hobbes in this tradition).²³ Indeed, Meinecke says that by its very nature, a clear definition of the concept of reason of state is not possible.²⁴ Nor is a calculus of the real interests of states always possible, since the interests are often ambivalent themselves, so that the statesman will often have to choose between Scylla and Charybdis, since the dilemmas of political necessity escape a clear

²⁰ Weldes 1999, p. 3.

²¹ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 100, sees in the *Lehre* of the European balance of power nothing else than a detail of the general *Lehre* of the reason of state

²² Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], pp. 174-175.

²³ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 188.

²⁴ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 245.

assessment.²⁵ Looking at ‘politics, as it really is’²⁶, Meinecke sees the classical world of tragedy as the field of statesmanship: only with the sense of history and the experience of politics given by the reason of state can statesmen hope to acquire the art of statesmanship (*Staatskunst*). It is a reflective, but ultimately practical knowledge. Hence, the power concept of this practical knowledge might not be transferable into the experimental logic of the field of explanatory theory.²⁷

Having now clarified the different fields, I will use the rest of this paper to show how they used to be combined in the work of Weber. Weber is a pivotal figure since his writings still consciously relate the three fields of power analysis. At the same time, his work stands for the beginning of a period (the 20th century) where the three fields moved away from each other, before now coming back together again. Showing the early connection may help us to see how now, with the accumulated knowledge of the three fields, such a re-connection can be more systematically made.

II. The simultaneity of the three fields of power analysis in Max Weber’s sociology

It is not fortuitous that concepts play a special role when we think about the link of different domains of knowledge. They are the conduit for passing ideas or simple associations from one to the other. This is particularly so for scholars, such as Max Weber, who see conceptual analysis as more than a simply preliminary step for any precise empirical analysis.²⁸ For him, concepts are both the condition for the possibility of knowledge, and an important end of our scholarly investigation: they allow empirical investigation with the end of building up a social theory, and yet at the same time, the relationship between the concepts provide the core of that very social theory. As Martin Bulmer writes, ‘concepts such as the “protestant ethic” or “marginal utility” derive their meaning from the part they play in the theory in which they are embedded, and from

²⁵ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 275.

²⁶ Meinecke 1957 [1924/29], p. 165.

²⁷ This is a reformulation of the main thesis in my book on realism. I argued that the realist tradition in IR can best be understood as the repeated, and repeatedly failed, attempt to translate the maxims of classical European diplomacy into more general laws of a US social science (Guzzini 1998, p. 1).

²⁸ For a more thorough discussion of different types of conceptual analysis, as applied to power, see Guzzini 2005.

the role in that theory itself.²⁹ This apparently tautological procedure is but the result of a hermeneutic circle. On the one hand, Weber defends a hermeneutic approach to the social sciences in which we have to retrace the meaning given to social action by the actors themselves. At the same time, this retracing constitutes an understanding by an observer which must necessarily rely on some pre-conceived notions. And the understanding at the level of observation cannot ultimately succeed if its notions are not systematically revised through that understanding at the level of action. The tautology is hence 'resolved' through a dialectical sequence of inductive understanding and deductive explanation.

Such an understanding of concept formation in social theory has two fundamental consequences. For one, Weber is relatively 'pragmatic' in his choice of concepts. To some extent, concepts, or indeed 'ideal types', are heuristic devices whose usefulness can only be judged in their use itself within the analysis thus conceived.³⁰ If they worked, we carry on; if not, we change. This taxonomic approach is a standard procedure also within positivism. And yet, at the same time, such concepts are themselves a result of this inductive-deductive analysis, and hence cannot be merely devised in pragmatic terms. The social theory itself and the empirical analyses it informs provide the meaning-context within which concept formation can take place. Since Weber has an approach deeply rooted in historical sociology where interpretation is based on the change of historical phenomena, concept formation, in turn, must be informed by those results. Concepts are not just there to catch or give meaning; in a sense, human history gives meaning to them. More precisely, Weber's understanding of the present through its past means that concepts must be devised in a way to capture what he believes to be the main historical phenomenon for his political sociology. In my understanding, this is given by his general focus on the origins of modernisation, and, particular to his political sociology: the history and logic of state formation and rationalisation. In his words, where every concept counts: 'The evolved product is the monopolisation of legitimate violence by the political territorial unit and its rational *Vergesellschaftung* in an institutionalised order.'³¹

²⁹ Bulmer 1979: 658.

³⁰ E.g. for such a defense of defining the three types of legitimate domination in terms of the way obedience/consent is obtained, see Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 123.

³¹ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 516. 'Entwicklungsprodukt ist nur die Monopolisierung der legitimen Gewaltsamkeit durch den politischen Gebietsverband und dessen rationale Vergesellschaftung zu einer anstaltsmäßigen Ordnung.' If not otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

Second, a Weberian approach to concept formation implies that any conceptual analysis which isolates one concept necessarily relates to adjacent concepts in the theory, indeed slides into the task of assessing a whole theory. For the present purpose, following this would be a self-defeating, if almost inevitable enterprise. What will be needed, at least, is to see the connection of power to the general theory and then a focus on its particular place in it. As I will try to argue, the concept of power and specifically the sub-concept of domination/rule (*Herrschaft*) is crucial for Weber in his assessment of the modern state. In return, the modern state provides the background against which power and domination/rule are defined. More specifically, power is part of a long definitional move which starts from conceptualising (1) social action as human relation, then (2) the origins of patterned social actions (customs, habit, convention and norms), (3) the inevitable struggle (*Kampf*) and hierarchical differentiation in the competition for life-chances in social relations, (4) the emergence of society versus community (*Gesellschaft* und *Gemeinschaft*) within which (5) power and domination/rule are crucial for defining the specifically political moment: (6) in a modern state, politics is defined by its relationship to physical constraint or violence as *ultima ratio*, a violence which, to the extent it is consented to (is legitimate) has become increasingly monopolised by the rationally legitimised political system.³² In Weber's scheme, power is intrinsically related to the definition of 'politics', where the inevitable differentiation of life-chances (or: 'selection', *Auslese*) in any social order is ultimately connected to the threat or use of physical violence and the competition to take control of it.

The following will disentangle the most important components for the understanding of power and domination/rule/authority. I see at least four axes in his social theory in which power plays a crucial role. Weber's political ontology ultimately ties power to the very definition of politics and a struggle for existence. His political sociology concentrates on a subcategory of power, *Herrschaft*, in its attempt to catch the specificity of a hierarchical order in modern bureaucratic societies. The inevitable struggle for power in politics means also that his practical ethics (praxeology) must at least include a form of Machiavellism, Weber's famous 'ethics of responsibility'. Finally, his theory of world history derives from the unchangeable 'polytheism' of value systems and the inevitability of (great) power politics in international affairs, in which order is precarious in the ever returning 'combat of Gods'. Since Weber starts from a particular domain of power analysis, when combining his insights, the following might give a glimpse into the way early social theory has connected them, or took connections for granted.

³² For this chain, see the dense account of fundamental sociological concepts in Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 11-30.

1. POWER AND WEBER'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY OF EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE

Classical political theory is concerned with the definition of the 'good' polity and 'good' statesmanship. Until now, neo-Aristotelian political theory (and not only) is organised around the idea of a common good that needs to be defined and institutionally anchored. Besides this lineage, as already mentioned, the modern conception of politics includes also a Machiavellian tradition based on the reason of state. Indeed, the 18th century experienced an increasing reduction towards politics as *Machtkunst* (approx. the art/craft of power/governing).³³ Weber is in this latter lineage. In his view, sociology has to be empirical, as opposed to legal or normative. Therefore, for him, it makes no sense to define the content of politics, or define the state through its purpose. Empirically, it can have an unlimited number of purposes, be a predatory state (*Raubstaat*), welfare state, *Rechtsstaat*, or culture state, for instance.³⁴ Instead, the state and politics have to be defined through their means.

Defining politics through its organisation and in terms of its specific means is very consequential for his theory. This innocently looking move, justified by a scientific necessity to provide a non-normative science and to cut out distinctive concepts for analysis, generates his theory's focus on violence, therefore struggle and selection or stratification in social orders. Whatever his personal or philosophical preferences, whatever his personal vision of a better government (and his political writings are filled with reform proposals), his sociological analysis will look for the defining and hence specific features of his central concepts and this moves the possibility of physical violence (*Gewaltsamkeit*) into the center of politics. For the threat or actual use of violence is that characteristics which sets politics aside from economics, law or other spheres of social relations.³⁵ In his lecture *Politics as a Vocation*, he varies by saying that the specific means of politics is power (which seems not to work with the definition below), behind which stands the possibility of physical violence. In a further escalation of this argument (also not found in his *opus*

³³ Sellin 1978.

³⁴ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 514.

³⁵ Weber is not very precise here. He mentions first three such social spheres which define the social order: the sphere of law, of economics, and one he calls social sphere, defined by rank and prestige. Yet, only a couple of pages later, we get the 'sphere of power' added to the list, presumably the sphere of politics. Whereas power imbued all three initial spheres (economic power having an effect of prestige, etc.), seen in a relatively horizontal way, a specific sphere of power seems to imply a hierarchy of spheres. See Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 531, 539. A similar tension can be found in the post-Weberian Bourdieu when he has to think about the 'political field' which appears both ways. See in particular Bourdieu 1989.

magnum), he even writes that politics has specific tasks which can ultimately be resolved only through violence (*Gewalt*).³⁶

On the basis of the central role of the possibility of physical violence, Weber ties a conceptual package around struggle-power-politics. Power (*Macht*) is defined as ‘any chance within a social relation to impose one’s will also against the resistance of others, independently of what gives rise to this chance.’³⁷ Struggle (*Kampf*) is defined in a very similar manner to power: ‘A social relation should be called *struggle*, if action is pursued with the purpose to impose one’s own will against the resistance of social partner or partners.’ He distinguishes between violent and peaceful struggles (without physical violence), then called ‘competition’. Struggles about life (or survival) chances which are not conscious or intentionally conducted, are called selection (*Auslese*), either social (people) or biological (survival of genes).³⁸ Now, if power and violence are connected to the very definition of politics, then politics is fundamentally defined by struggle, either conscious fight (and violence as *ultima ratio*) or the perennial and inevitable selective differentiation of life-chances: ‘Politik ist: *Kampf*.’³⁹ The concept of power functions as the crucial link between the two (and might well produce a conceptual circle).

The little definitional move to understand politics in terms of means hence leads to remarkable consequences: nothing less but an ontology of politics as an existential struggle, even if such struggle is understood less in martial, but rather in ‘agonistic’ terms (for including simple competition). This raises the question whether it is the little definitional move which is the driving part, or whether Weber has a political ontology which requires him to make these definitional moves. Precisely because concepts cannot just be defined for pragmatic reasons, his ontology is part of or derived from his reading and understanding of history which is closely connected to a certain ideology. And indeed, the otherwise very Weberian Raymond Aron is highly sceptical of what he perceives as a strong and a priori metaphysical commitment, partly social Darwinian, partly Nietzschean, in this emphasis on existential struggle⁴⁰; a commitment he would find himself not sufficiently empirically grounded in his reading of history. As we will see later, there are some good reasons for sharing this suspicion.

³⁶ Weber 1988 [1919]-a: 550, 557 respectively.

³⁷ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 28.

³⁸ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 20.

³⁹ Weber 1988 [1918]: 329

⁴⁰ Aron 1967: 650.

2. CAUSALITY AND *HERRSCHAFT*: WEBER'S POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

Already in his political ontology, a topic within the domain of political theory par excellence, Weber introduces a commitment to an explanatory empirical science (which then produces a circle because it does not reflect sufficiently on its own assumptions). Even more so, when he moves to his actual political sociology. And this has remarkable results for the concept of power, otherwise so fundamental to his theory. Indeed, precisely because power plays such a fundamental and indeed ubiquitous role in politics, Weber is not much interested in 'power' itself, when he moves to his social theory. It is not distinctive enough as an analytical category for empirical research. He calls it amorphous, since all imaginable qualities of a human action and all possible situational constellations can provide this chance to impose one's will.⁴¹ Weber prefers to look only at a subcategory of the concept of power, domination/rule/authority (*Herrschaft*)⁴² which he defines as the fact that 'an expressed will ("order/command") of the dominating actors intends to influence the action of the subordinates and actually influences in a way such, that the latter act ... as if they had turned the content of the command, for its own sake, into a maxim of their action ("obedience").'⁴³

As we will see in this section, this move from power to *Herrschaft* is informed by the attempt to turn a political theory of power into a theory of action, where domination plays an important role as cause, just as in Dahl later. Since Weber's definition of power reappears in Dahl and has been very prominent ever since, this discussion of *Herrschaft* in the explanatory field will use Dahl's power approach as a foil against which Weber's rather different general approach can be assessed. Although the definition of power did travel, the place it has in Weber's theory did not.

A first subsection will show that how the logic of the field of explanatory theory takes over the field of political theory. And yet, at the same time, Weber recognises the arbitrariness of his conceptual decisions in a way which pre-announces the later debates about Dahl's approach. Indeed, as a second subsection will show, his move trades on ideological assumptions coming from his underlying political theory. And his approach to *Herrschaft* eventually makes sense only in a theory of domination which is informed by a structural view of society and aims at a macro-

⁴¹ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 28-29.

⁴² The translation of Weber's concept of *Herrschaft* is notoriously difficult. For its hierarchical element connected to the underlying idea of force/violence, 'domination' seems most appropriate; 'rule' captures better his interest in regularised command competence; and finally, 'authority' renders perhaps best his insistence on legitimacy mechanisms which are attached to *Herrschaft*. For this reason, I keep the concept in its German original.

⁴³ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 544.

historical theory, not for a theory of action. Therefore, delimiting his approach just to a causal theory of action, as Dahl and the community power debate did, ultimately amounts to a theoretical reduction.

The turn to causality and a theory of action in the definition of *Herrschaft*

Weber is aware and vary of the ubiquitous nature of power and *Herrschaft*. As so often in his sociology (e.g. in his ideal types), he therefore decides to highlight one particular factor which, according to him, summarises the main facet of the phenomenon. For him, this is *autoritäre Befehlsgewalt* (authoritarian competence and effect of command). But the intellectual road to this core is quite tortuous. He thinks about *Herrschaft* in a clear ‘causal chain’ (*Kausalkette*) from A affecting B. But that chain is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition to constitute an incident of *Herrschaft*.

Weber spends some time distinguishing between two forms of *Herrschaft*, one resulting from a specific constellation of interests (as in an oligopolistic or monopolistic market) and another generated by authority (order competency paired with a duty to obey).⁴⁴ He gives a series of examples of how power permeates exchange relations of all sorts, on the market, in the ‘salon’, in the lecture hall. And yet, remarkably, he argues for excluding this first type of *Herrschaft*, based on the constellation of interests, from his final and narrower definition of *Herrschaft*. The crucial difference between these two types, so he insists, is that whatever power there is in a relation of exchange, they are done on the basis of interest and hence are voluntary (*freiwillig*). Instead, authority relations are such where the change of behaviour is ultimately related to a command obeyed for its own sake, independent of any concern with interests on either side of the power relation.

Obviously, Weber concedes, market relations can turn into relations of authority, but they are a form of *Herrschaft* only then when there is a command-obedience relation, preferably one which is formalised and institutionalised. Obviously, as he says, such *Herrschaft* based on exchange can be experienced as far more oppressing, exactly for its irregular character (and its horizontal and diffuse character, one could add). Nevertheless, for reasons of conceptual clarity, this will be discarded in the actual analysis of *Herrschaft*.

⁴⁴ He calls it *Herrschaft kraft Interessenkonstellation* and *Herrschaft kraft Autorität*. For the following discussion, see Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 542ff.

Hence, as the lawyer he is, and whatever the mixed cases and grey zones, he starts his understanding of *Herrschaft* from the existence of a legal norm that the commanding actor can enforce. When it comes to the sociological concept of *Herrschaft*, there is a clearly hierarchical and institutionalised whiff to it. It is not fortuitous that the concept of *Herrschaft* needs to be translated as 'rule'. It is this institutionalised aspect of rule which fascinates the organisational theorist and lawyer Weber. Still, as a sociologist, he would exclude a purely formal and legal approach. He retains only those social relations where the command can count on being obeyed. Dahl's research programme has been set on tracks here.

The underlying assumptions of Weber's definition of *Herrschaft*

It is a truly remarkable move for a sociologist to consciously neglect those parts of power relations which are more diffuse and more horizontal because they are connected to exchange relations whose asymmetries derive from constellations of interests. It is not too far-fetched to say that much recent political theory of power from Dahl to its reversal in Foucault, is concerned with the question of power as it is related to individual autonomy: it is a crucial issue in democratic theory. Insisting that exchange relations be removed from these concerns, has a distinct liberal, almost libertarian touch to it which itself remains however unreflected. For even if we think of interest formation as something always including a component of 'free will', surely we must be interested how much that is. Not to speak of the more radical approaches which insist that such autonomy is only formal, if social exchange relations are not embedded into the understanding of rule.

Not only is the theoretical reflection neglected, Weber's assumptions might appear today 'un-sociological', as it were. Weber proposes a strict demarcation between a sphere of exchange (mainly the economy) and a sphere of domination (politics), surely ideal-typical as he would say (and he does allow for many mixed cases or rather mutual spill-overs). Typical for his time, a sociology interested in modernisation looks at the rationalising processes, including the emergence of a series of autonomous sub-systems in society, such as law, politics and economics. And yet, for someone who insists that the actual empirical and not the formal legal aspects are decisive, it seems almost odd to analyse the social order only by decomposing it and not by focusing on the links, or trying to piece the spheres together again into a 'society'. Or, at least, his conceptualisation excludes that it be the idea of power or *Herrschaft* which provides the overarching element for such a general theory of society. For his conceptualisation intrinsically connects politics not just to power, but more specifically to relations of domination (*Herrschaftsverhältnisse*), thereby 'extracting' power from the other social spheres and cementing

this division of social spheres.⁴⁵ Again, it seems as if the lawyer took the upper hand in this conceptualisation. It is not unusual that lawyers, who turn social and political theorists, are particularly sensitive to the idea of violence being connected to power. Moving from law as a normative system to the actual application of law, they approach politics in a negative way, as that which is not law and yet necessary to it. And then, consequently, power gets connected to the subsystem politics only (as the base of, and concomitantly possible exception to, the rule of law), as Carl Schmitt or Niklas Luhmann show.⁴⁶ Still, at least today, it may no longer be so self-evident to proceed this way, when many sociological observers see social spheres merging and re-defining, not the least in ‘political economy’ which Weber purported to defend at his time.

Herrschaft in Weber’s wider social theory and macro-history

After the first section on his ontological assumptions, we have seen how the logic of the explanatory social science field intrudes into his analysis of *Herrschaft*. The felt need to cut concepts to operationalisable portion and the shift towards a causal theory are well present, precursor to Dahl’s and most of the mainstream approaches today. And yet the logic of the explanatory field has still its roots in a liberal political theory which is not sufficiently acknowledged and reflected or justified. Similarly, it trades on a pre-given understanding of a society divided into different social spheres, where power becomes attached to one and one only, the political one – again an assumption which is not necessary for the mere sake of conceptual pragmatism and value-neutral empirical analysis. The present subsection will go a step further. It will argue that Weber’s theory of action, although individualistic and causal in a way which fits the pluralist power conception, cannot be divorced from a wider social theory and macro-history, which sits more uneasily with it.

The need to embed Weber’s definition of power and domination into such wider contexts appears already in his early definitional moves about *Herrschaft*. Weber wants to make sure that purely formal entitlements are not necessarily misread as power or *Herrschaft*. In other words, even if, formally speaking, one actor has a means to make the other change action, and hence has power in some sense, it does not necessarily imply *Herrschaft*. He mentions an example of workers who could be seen to hold power over their employers, since they are entitled to a pay check or indeed to legal support against the employer, should he/she not pay. But then, rather than as seeing this as an asymmetric power relation, Weber defines this as an asymmetric social exchange,

⁴⁵ In Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 30.

⁴⁶ For the analysis of Luhmann’s concept of power with a by now almost anachronistic division of social spheres (and the central role of physical violence), see Guzzini 2004. Morgenthau is a more mixed case.

not *Herrschaft*.⁴⁷ The same move which oddly excludes relations of exchange from *Herrschaft*, also excludes a vision where contracts or legal norms are not checked for their actual status in social hierarchy. He explicitly excludes a definition of *Herrschaft* which would allow just any form of influence to be included and where the concentration on the interaction obscures the more general social setting in which it occurs.

This wider social context appears in all its force when we move towards his basic explanatory puzzle which is not to be found in the explanation of individual outcomes, as most present-day theories of action would have it, but in a macro-history of social order. This embeds his analysis of power and *Herrschaft* to the wider general purposes of his whole theory, namely his understanding of legitimacy and historical change. The starting point for his specification of power as *Herrschaft* is, as always in Weber, the individual understanding of actors and how it feeds into the subjectively driven reproduction (or change) of social order. He distinguishes famously between 4 types of social action: instrumental-rational, value rational, 'affectional' and traditional. From there derive the different causes for accepting *Herrschaft*: personal advantages and fear, duty and conviction, or habit.⁴⁸ Yet such motives for accepting *Herrschaft* are not enough to ensure more permanent social order. This is provided by the belief in its legitimacy (*Legitimitätsglaube*). Referring back to his typology of social action, legitimacy can then derive from rationality (legal domination), tradition (traditional domination) or charisma, which provide the three pure types of legitimate domination. The corresponding super-ordinate persons are the bureaucratic 'superior', the 'master' (*Herr*) and the leader (*Führer*).⁴⁹ Clearly, the moment legitimacy is introduced into the system and habit acknowledged for inducing norm-following behaviour, the focus shifts from the micro-sociological dyadic A-B relationship to a macro-sociological study of social practices and order.

Moreover, when he declares 'power' not to be such a useful concept, it is not only for its almost ubiquitous (and hence trivial) status, but also for the role it plays in its wider theory. Coming back to his approach to concept formation: concepts are 'useful' within the theory in which they are embedded and those theories, in turn, are driven by cognitive interests which cannot be justified through the theories themselves.⁵⁰ So, the analysis needs to start from that cognitive interest. Weber's overarching cognitive interest is to retrace the specificity and yet potential universality of

⁴⁷ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 123.

⁴⁸ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 545.

⁴⁹ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 122, 124.

⁵⁰ Weber 1988 [1919]-b.

Western modernisation which he sees not just as a mere question for sociology, but as *the* all-encompassing puzzle for the social sciences. He retraces the changes such modernisation makes to each and every sphere, indeed to their very genesis. Crucial and overarching in this respect is the historical shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (see also its early place in the logical chain, mentioned above) which sets the stage for the analysis of all social spheres. In turn, those social spheres are investigated for their significance in that particular shift. When he studies religions, for instance, he does not intend to elucidate their ‘nature’, but looks at religions as conditions and consequences of certain types of collective action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*).⁵¹

And so he does for *Herrschaft*. Since the differentiation of life chances and the struggle for power are historically perennial (and hence trivial for an empirical sociology), the study of *Herrschaft* must be about the different types of command-consent relations which keep a political unit together in the first place. Despite his insistence on the importance of the possibility of physical violence for defining politics, social order is usually not based on their actual use: custom, habit, convention and indeed the legitimacy of rule are not only more frequent but often also much more efficient for ensuring order.⁵² Understanding why people obey command for the sake of it, and not for some interest calculus is hence fundamentally significant. Therefore, he believes he needs a narrow concept of *Herrschaft*. It is this focus on social order by a command followed for its own sake which drives the distinction, and from which the distinction criterion of ‘free will’ derives, and not from the micro-sociological assessment of personal autonomy.

Hence, despite his methodological stance to understand society through the meaning given to social action by individuals, this subjective factor is but a means to the end of understanding macro-history. Weber is primarily interested in the changing forms of social order in world history, not individual autonomy, otherwise so important for the liberal political theorist. It is somewhat ironic, that his definition of power, which prominently features questions of personal ‘will’ and resistance have become the very fundament in the community power debate, strongly focusing on the policy process, when the theory of action was a merely preliminary component for Weber’s own macro-sociology in which *Herrschaft* play an altogether different and important role.

⁵¹ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 245.

⁵² Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 184f.

3. POWER, POLITICAL ACTION AND THE ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY: WEBER'S PRAXEOLOGY

Although in principle concentrating only on the means and not the content of government, Weber does have a substantial normative component in his analysis after all. It creeps in when he discusses successful statesmanship in the context of bureaucratic modernisation. According to him, such good statesmanship is threatened on two fronts. On the one side, the very bureaucratic organisation which makes government more efficient and incomparably more powerful, that very modernisation which is part of the Western domination over the world, also selects leadership personnel according to criteria unsuitable for the political and not just administrative component of government. On the other side, illusionary conceptions about what politics is all about allow value-rational attitudes to intrude and have its perverse effects. It is in those passages about the central role of the struggle for power and the need of a instrumental rationality primarily based on the calculus of consequences, which have established Weber as a realist thinker within the IR community. My discussion can be shorter.

Weber is known for his hate-love relationship to modern bureaucratic organisation, be it public administration or the modern capitalist firm. There is no doubt that he believes it to be a most crucial component for understanding the way modern societies develop and for understanding the political superiority of the Western world in an age of imperialism. And yet, this unprecedented power is only more dangerous if left in the wrong hands. For Weber clearly believes that professional knowledge is insufficient for modern government.

Weber distinguishes between two components in the modern firm or government. One is the rank and file. Here, specialisation is an advantage and the low profile of the bureaucrat or accountant necessary for a successful functioning of the organisation. Rank and file employees are not supposed to contradict. If they disagree, they voice the disagreement, but ultimately it is their duty, indeed a question of honour, to obey the superior.⁵³ But this does not apply to the leaders of those organisations. There, this type of behaviour would be at best useless, and, with the existing concentration of power, potentially a catastrophe.

The politician is defined by Weber as a person who has to access power through the competition for power, not because of some special knowledge alone. Whereas the public servant (*Beamte*) has to stay outside of politics, politicians have to face politics as a struggle for power in which they

⁵³ Weber 1988 [1918]: 335

want to win and if they do, be responsible for themselves and their acts. Hiding behind the bureaucratic procedure only produces irresponsible and ultimately politically inappropriate behaviour. It allows politicians to stay glued to their chairs: Weber is fond of quoting Bismarck's expression of *Kleber*, 'gluer' for such people. More by implication than explicit in Weber, it also divorces risk from personal responsibility and hence undermines also a sense of moderation and prudence so crucial in much diplomacy (an argument, Weber uses against monarchs at another place).

It is the 'specific means of the *legitimate possibility of physical violence* ('legitime Gewaltsamkeit') in the hands of human associations (*Verbände*) in and for itself, which causes the particularities of all the ethical problems in politics.'⁵⁴ If power is the inevitable means of politics and the ambition for power the driving force of politics, if physical violence is the *ultima ratio* of politics, then this politician cannot be judged according to the same criteria we would judge moral persons in their daily actions. The instinct of power is necessary part and parcel of the good politician.⁵⁵ If moral persons do not wish to care about the consequences of their acts, purely insisting of their intrinsic ethical worth, then they are not fit for this business. Weber strongly defends an 'ethics of responsibility' based on compromise and prudence to an 'ethics of pure convictions' which cannot really compromise and is happy to fault the world for unwarranted consequences, instead of their own actions (or so he depicts this opposition). For him, this is a luxury, domestic and world politics cannot afford.

I tried not to give any special account of this famous dichotomy. And yet, the perhaps remarkable fact is that I placed it in a discussion of political practice and not in a section on anthropological assumptions. Some realist theories who wish to muster Weber in their support will inevitable use the 'struggle for power' as a feature of human nature to base their conflict-ridden vision of social action. As Krasner once said, conflict is the default position for the Realist, cooperation needs to be understood.⁵⁶ But Weber fits only trivially or uncomfortably into this picture. For one, to produce the realist assumption, one needs to look at power exclusively in its strongest Weberian understanding: as ultimately relying on physical violence alone. Otherwise, the concept does not cut. A competition for painting the nicest picture, although certainly a struggle (*Kampf*) in Weber's widest sense, would not do (it would usually not be decided by

⁵⁴ Weber 1988 [1919]-a: 556.

⁵⁵ For this and the following, see Weber 1988 [1919]-a: 546ff.

⁵⁶ Krasner 1982.

violence). If that were all what there is to the ‘struggle for power’, it simply says that social actions *can* involve an element of conflict.

If we go, however, beyond this trivial finding, then Weber becomes an odd bedfellow for realists. As we have seen earlier, power as related to violence, is by definition tied to political action only. Weber has many other types of social spheres, and respective social actions, where physical violence plays a minor or no role. Only if the social aspects of human nature could be defined such that all social behaviour can be reduced into politics and/or the social unit reduced to its political component only, only then can one derive an anthropological assumption from Weber’s position. Whatever Weber’s formulations here and there in his scattered political writings, that simply does not fit his sociology.⁵⁷ In other words, what drives this understanding is not a foundation in Human Nature in the field of political theory, as it were, but again the definitional link between power and politics, indeed the political sphere. At the level of the social unit, it is the link between relations of *Herrschaft* and the definition of politics at the level of the social unit, and, at the level of the political actor, it stems from thinking power in terms of the ethics of politics. There, power plays a crucial role, but not in terms of Human Nature. His praxeology stays hence quite closely related to the field of explanatory theory.

4. POWER POLITICS AND WORLD HISTORY

But then, where does Weber’s pessimism come from? Is he not known for having written about the ‘struggle of Gods’? Why would observers, as sympathetic as Aron, be concerned about his Nietzschean and Darwinian lineage?

One of the most interesting components of Weber’s analysis of power lies in his vision of international relations. That should come as a surprise. For disheartening it is to see again a famous thinker waiting until the end of his life to write about International Relations and missing the moment. In the densely printed almost 950 pages of *Economy and Society*, the closest we get to a section on IR is the fragment on the evolution of the nation-state, 16 pages long, the only section which cuts off in the middle of a sentence.⁵⁸

His international analysis is interesting for being less straightforward than his sociology would lead us to expect. After all, Weber’s definition of the modern state has been the demarcation

⁵⁷ For some sobering examples of early Darwinism and actually also racism (later revoked), see Weber 1988 [1895]: 12-14 and Weber 1988 [1896]: 28-29.

⁵⁸ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 514-530.

criterion of the entire contemporary discipline of international relations. If the modern state is holding the monopoly of legitimate means of violence, no such thing can exist above it and hence politics inside and politics outside cannot be the same. International relations remain stuck in a state of nature, and a theory of international relations would cease to exist, if that difference would be overcome.⁵⁹ Having defined the criterion for setting international relations apart, Aron is not convinced by Weber's social theory which seems to make so little out of it and hence imports unnecessarily grim pictures of IR into domestic politics. Indeed, even Weber's vision of international relations, his 'theory of power politics', as Aron dubs it, is ultimately a failure.⁶⁰ What kind of a theory is it?

An IR taught scholar would expect to have Weber develop his theory of 'power politics' simply out of the particular setting of the international without overarching authority, the opposite to the monopoly of violence within the state. One just needs a bit of Hobbes, or so the story goes, and then political 'struggle' will inevitably lead to the permanent state of (potential) war. Weber's picture is however far more complicated. It includes by necessity an analysis of social classes and their link to government and a series of subjective factors those leading classes may share which are related, but not reducible, to power positions and perceptions. His vision is 'inside-out' and clearly does not see international politics as different in kind from domestic politics.

Weber does not move to international relations from anarchy, a word alien to his approach. Weber tends to see wars as an *ultima ratio*, but their actual outbreak as a consequence of the 'structure of society'.⁶¹ This society is not only defined in what we would call Kantian terms, namely through its domestic institutions. For those institutions, in turn, have been shaped by the possibility of war. He clearly endorses what has become famous in the words of another post-Weberian, Charles Tilly, namely that war makes states and states make wars.⁶² For Weber, there is a clear link between the need to defend political units, the increasing monopolisation of means of violence and the rationalisation of both organisations and their legitimacy. With the parallel expansion of the market, classical class structures are undermined, their competition in the legitimacy for keeping means of violence reduced, the state reinforced. War and capitalism make

⁵⁹ Aron 1962: 19.

⁶⁰ Aron 1967: 656.

⁶¹ Weber 1988 [1919]-a: 549.

⁶² This thesis might have been first exposed by Otto Hintze, a German historian from the same period. For a critique of this thesis in today's international political context, see Leander 2004.

states, and then the power competition of states allows the expansion of capitalism.⁶³ A focus on the evolution of states keeps domestic politics and IR together.

Weber's approach to IR is hence a mercantilist historical sociology. But the maximisation of power (internal or external) does not necessarily follow. There are several steps in his approach which a state must go through before it is a *Machtstaat*, before such a *Machtstaat* is expansionist, and before that expansion then heightens the risk of war. Power does not lead by necessity to power politics. Although Weber starts his section by saying that all political units are units of violence, he immediately adds that such violence does not need to become 'expansionist' and could stay 'autonomistic'. Factors which can influence the actual behaviour are partly structural, as e.g. a country's size, its geographic location and its historical fortune (i.e. he mentions Switzerland's road to neutrality). But among those, clearly more important are social factors: much depends on whether the inherently expansionist forces of capitalism which give rise to imperialism are embedded in a social structure where no peaceful economic counter-forces exist. He argues that the more state-owned the internal production is, the more those social groups will be empowered that could profit from territorial expansion.⁶⁴

Besides these more objective factors (although not God-given or unchangeable), there are a series of more subjective factors which ultimately decide about state behaviour, i.e. in the most important case, decide when a country, which is large enough, becomes a *Machtstaat*.⁶⁵ For this, it first needs to think of itself as a *Grossmacht*. Only if states think that they have a special responsibility and interest in world-wide political and economic affairs, only if they have a sense of vocation, of having a responsibility and honour before history, they become a *Grossmacht*. But even then, despite the necessary dynamics of power competition in politics, a *Machtstaat* does not necessarily follow.⁶⁶

This first subjective element might be surprising and yet is quite coherently introduced in a sociology which is built upon meaning-giving social actions. Still, it needs to be empirically grounded: who is it who 'thinks of itself' as having a vocation? Weber cannot just

⁶³ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 517-519, and 211 respectively.

⁶⁴ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 525.

⁶⁵ Weber 1988 [1916]-a: 177.

⁶⁶ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 520-521. For statements about the almost inevitable vocational character of larger states, see Weber 1988 [1915]: 116f. (Defending the German fleet expansion), Weber 1988 [1916]-b: 142f., Weber 1988 [1916]-a: 175-177. Needless to say that it nicely serves as a 'neutral' explanation for German diplomacy and rearmament before the war.

anthropomorphise the state - and yet, the state is a collective actor, not an individual whose meaning-giving we try to understand.

Weber builds the conceptual bridge by introducing two other intersubjective phenomena, 'prestige' and 'the nation' which are, in turn, attached to particular classes within a society. 'Prestige' is connected to the politically ruling social group, or, put differently, of that social group that makes its living from holding political power. Being proud of one's country is not enough. Prestige means that power is used within a codex of honour. In a certain sense, the ruling classes simply transfer aristocratic rules of behaviour to the relations between states.⁶⁷ Weber says that the exact influence is difficult to gauge, but undeniable. The second element is 'the nation', or more precisely, 'the idea of a nation'. For Weber, a nation is not a physical category, but is based on a feeling of solidarity within a group.⁶⁸ The social group carrying this type of subjective condition towards war proneness are the intellectuals whom Weber sees as predestined to propagate the national idea (this is the passage just before the fragment stops). It is here where he mentions explicitly the concept of a 'providential mission' which consists in the superiority or at least the irreplaceable character of (national) cultural goods which can only strive, if their individuality is preserved.⁶⁹

Now, we have reached a point where we can close the circle. The analysis started with the political ontology of existential struggle which disappears from view the more we followed Weber's sociology. But here, at the level of international relations, it does re-appear at least in his shorter political writings. It does not surface in the logic of the field of political theory, however; it appears in the logic of the reason of state. And, in turn, this produces odd inferences into the analysis. The re-appearance of the existential struggle is the effect of two underlying ideas. One has to do with the 'struggle of gods' or the irreducible 'polytheism' of modernity (as applied to world politics). The other one is the evergreen about the origins of 'the rise and fall of Empires/states', that is long-term power dynamics in world history. And it is here, where Aron finds Weber so unconvincing.

⁶⁷ For an explicit argument relating war making and state formation to the behavioural patterns of a certain elite, see Krippendorff 1985.

⁶⁸ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 528.

⁶⁹ When Weber writes political pamphlets, he himself perfectly fitted this description where the struggle for the preservation if not imposition of the 'character of the culture of the future' becomes an almost self-evident mission for Germany. See e.g. Weber 1988 [1916]-b: 143.

Weber's definition of polytheism is ambivalent. In one famous passage, polytheism results from modernisation, i.e. the differentiation of society in social spheres which follow different laws.⁷⁰ This passage is closely connected to his critique of applying a pure ethics of conviction to the political sphere and hence to his praxeology. At another passage, and certainly in a related manner, Weber implicitly derives it from the different kinds of spheres of human action. Referring to Nietzsche and Baudelaire, he writes that it is 'common wisdom that something can be true, despite or indeed because it is neither beautiful, nor holy, nor good.'⁷¹ Here, the four categories match quite well the four types of social action where truth is related to instrumental rationality, the good to value rationality, the holy to traditional social action and, beauty, albeit only with some good conceptual will, to 'affectional' social action. This means that it is not just the historical evolution of a more differentiated society which is causing polytheism, but rather the irreducible difference in the types of social action themselves (which, true, are also an effect of historical modernisation). From here, the discussion might easily connect to liberal theory, such as John Rawls', which starts from the incommensurability of different conceptions of the good (polytheism) for basing his theory of justice.⁷² But that is basically 'harmless', no link to a kind of world clash of Gods. And indeed, Weber wishes to use this argument for a policy of moderation which any choice in favour of one of the Gods would undermine.

The struggle of Gods on the world historical stage only happens with the identification of nations with Gods. There is already a slippery passage where Weber declares not knowing how one could possibly judge the value of German culture as compared to the French. This is simply to show the category mistake for applying truth-claims to cultural goods. And yet, it acquires a different sense, when it is put into the context of a passage where Weber talks about the 'value orders of the world which stay in an irresolvable struggle to each other', since this sentence, which would possibly make sense for general *Weltanschauungen* not geographically delimited (say between communism, his-day conservatism and liberalism), becomes something different if such value systems are attached to nations themselves. Only then, world history can be reduced to an 'eternal struggle' for the preservation and breeding of our national character (*Art*)' and foreign policy be guided by the such given permanent power political interests that requires it to master all

⁷⁰ Weber 1988 [1919]-a: 554f.

⁷¹ Weber 1988 [1919]-b: 604.

⁷² Rawls 1971, 1987.

domestic economic efforts and expand – all statements that his approach in *Economy and Society* denies, as seen above.⁷³

But, to be fair to Weber, this slippage only happens in his early writings. This passage is from his inaugural lecture in 1895 at a time he had completed his *Habilitation* on the topic of the ‘social origins of the decline of antique culture’. In his later writings, and in particular in his *Economy and Society*, Weber is aware of the fact that intellectuals who make themselves servants of a ‘nation’ and their culture, who propagate a specific national mission, may be doing something quite common to all intellectuals but not something inevitable. Moreover, he even says that an organisation to a *Machtstaat* can undermine the nation’s own culture.⁷⁴ This is his sobering and actually profoundly realist finding that missionary zeal is unjustified by its consequences and that therefore politics does have a responsibility in avoiding it. War is no necessity. And even if struggle is perennial, how struggle is conducted makes a huge difference, as Aron rightly insists. Only by combining the Darwinism of some early writings and the idea of polytheism in his post-1918 writings, can Aron reach a Weberian theory of *Machtspolitik*. That theory does not work in empirical grounds, but then, it was also not really proposed by Weber himself after the experience of World War I. Yet, it shows how the three fields are enmeshed here in this particular argument, which was initially driven by the field of practice, the discourse of the reason of state and the ‘ethics of responsibility’, a mix difficult to disentangle.

A partial conclusion: Weber’s simultaneous use of the different fields

This paper argued that the analysis of power is driven within three different fields who have their own logic, although they are not entirely autonomous from each other: the field of political theory, the field of explanatory theory and the field of ‘praxeology’. All are related to our understanding of ‘politics’, yet have a different take on it. The logic of power analysis in the field of political theory, as I understand it here, is to think about the nature of the ‘polity’ in which questions of the organisation of (organised) violence and of the common good, as well as questions of freedom, are paramount. It is where power stands for ‘government’ or ‘governance’ and political order, as well as personal ‘autonomy’. The logic in the field of explanatory theories is

⁷³ Weber 1988 [1895]: 14 (quote) and then ff.

⁷⁴ Weber 1980 [1921-22]: 530, fn. 3.

to think power in terms of a theory of action mainly and a theory of domination subsequently. Here, power is searched for the explanation of behaviour and the outcomes of social action. It is here where power is thought in terms of agency, influence or prevalence, if not cause. In the praxeological field, politics is the 'art of the possible' in which collective violence is not antithetical but fundamental to politics. Power is furthermore connected to the idea of state sovereignty in different ways. On the one hand, it refers to the recognition of 'agent-hood' connected to the control (power over) territory and people. On the other, more Schmittian sense, it refers to this final and sovereign decision where to exceptionally trespass moral or legal norms in the higher common interest, a decision which can not be taken away from, and indeed might define, the statesman. Finally, power is defined in connection with a special morality, namely this very special responsibility that befalls on political leaders to use the reason of state correctly.

If the understanding of politics is different, so it the source of knowledge claims. Whereas in the field of political theory, the analysis and understanding of power is based on contemplation and normative analysis; in the field of explanatory social science, it is based on experimental logic (hypothesis testing); and in the field of political practice it is based on historical experience and the maxims derived from it. It is my assumption that the understanding of power in International Relations is at the crossroad of these three fields and their knowledge claims.

Looking at Weber's analysis of power was meant to catch that moment in the development of power analysis where the second and third field had acquired their independence. Indeed, Weber is both part of a tradition which keeps a certain root in (normative) political theory and wishes to disentangle the social sciences from it. Moreover, he is sometimes referred to as one of the founding fathers of the discipline by the fact that he devised that definition of the state which sets IR apart from domestic politics. The presentation of his analysis of power proceeded in 4 steps, going through the 3 fields and having one section on IR in particular where most of the logics intruded and mixed. As could be expected from Weber, the most important field was the explanatory theory, his political sociology. And yet, at different stages, I tried to show how his claims on power in that field systematically relied on the other fields, sometimes unacknowledged by Weber himself.

Where to go from here? As I mentioned earlier, this paper is part of a research which tries to rethink and update the knowledge on power within those three fields, as applied to IR. The previous discussion should lay some groundwork for this, at least in a series of questions remaining, which I shortly raise here at the end.

The most difficult field to handle is the field of 'praxeology'. Although in principle, it may make sense to distinguish it on the same level of the others, in particular if they are defined with regard to the community which is the bearer of those discursive practices, one can run into problems when applying it. When Aron uses the concept, he referees both to a normative and philosophical field, which aims at questioning the assumptions again.⁷⁵ In his usage, the praxeological moment, which he places last in the analysis just as Weber would, corresponds to the earlier mentioned typical inductive-deductive circle, widened now by question of ethics. But, by the same token, that makes it often seem coincide with the first field, informing the start of the analysis (its assumptions). Indeed, it is not unusual simply to distinguish between two traditions in political theory about thinking politics, where 'praxeology' basically stands for the post-Machiavellian moment. During my analysis of Weber, the mix between the two was perhaps not satisfactorily disentangled; perhaps it could not. For the time being, I would still pursue with this distinction although it might imply a sharpening of the definition of the field of political theory.

A similar problem arises with regard to the placing of certain part of power analysis, in particular the discussion about Human Nature. In my reading of Weber, one could either place it in the first field, and then find his discussion rather less driven by it, or leave it with 'praxeology' and then upgrade it again. Since the associations are then quite different (namely whether it is derived from our knowledge of Human Nature or simply a prudential pragmatic advise) such discussion can turn out to be quite important for power analysis.

In any case, the aim of this preliminary paper was to introduce a different way of approaching power analysis which should guide an analytical history of power analysis in International Relations at the end of which the different pieces may or may not fall together again, as they still did in some parts of Weber's writings.

⁷⁵ Aron 1962, p. 30.

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