Thesis Paper – Weber Network

Epistemes of the Nation: A Knowledge-Historical Analysis of Max Weber's Ambivalent Concept of Nation – Inspired by Benedict Anderson

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Was Max Weber a Nationalist?

Since Wolfgang Mommsen's dissertation (1959), in which he described Weber as a "Nationalisten mit Augenmaß" much of Weber scholarship has centered on this very question. As Langewiesche notes: "Characterizations of Weber oscillate between cosmopolitan nationalist, inward-looking reform nationalist, political and economic nationalist, 'national anti-nationalist,' and literary nationalist" (Langewiesche, 2016, p. 40, own translation). Sung Ho Kim (2002) highlights Weber's liberal form of nationalism; Stephen Kalberg (2003) even sees Weber's conception of the subject as a foundation for the civil society's democratizing function.
The root of this oscillating reception lies in Weber's highly divergent engagement with the idea of the nation. In his scientific writings, he not only refrains from clearly defining the concept analytically, but also explicitly rejects any essentialist notion of belonging. In his political speeches, however, he assigns the nation the highest normative significance. The debate can be roughly divided along two lines: The theoretical-systematic readings, which view Weber the politician and his nationalism as marginal or analytically irrelevant (e.g., Reinhard Bendix, 1960), – and the historical-biographical readings, which identify nationalism as a core element of Weber's political thought (Langewiesche 2016, p. 40).

Research Interest

This paper builds on the existing debate but shifts the focus to the historical and epistemological conditions of Max Weber's ambivalent engagement with the concept of nation. At the center is an analytical reflection on the process by which the nation emerged as a central political actor and cultural reference in the course of 19th-century nation-state formation. This global transformation of the foundations of political legitimacy is framed theoretically by Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community." The study connects Weber's Terminology to Anderson's constructivist approach in order to understand how the symbolic and political power of the nation as a cultural system is reflected in Weber's overall work.

Theoretical Framework

Benedict Anderson proposes understanding nationalism not primarily as an ideology, but as a cultural system that absorbs the collapsing pre-modern orders—particularly religious communities and dynastic structures. According to Anderson, the nation is an "imagined community" that, through shared symbols, collective rituals, and a synchronized conception of time, offers a coherent framework for individual self-location. Thus, the nation takes over the structuring function of

religious belonging in a secularized form and becomes the universal reference point for modern identity formation.

Analytical Approach

Building on Anderson's theory, this paper develops a heuristic framework centered on: *temporal coherence, continuity, and collective identity*—as features that, in Anderson's view, characterize cultural systems. Along this framework, the paper analyzes Weber's use of the concept of nation, focusing on selected texts such as the speech „An der Schwelle des dritten Kriegsjahres" and the fragment „Machtprestige und Nationalgefühl". The goal is to uncover the cultural deep structure of Weber's understanding of the nation and to situate it within the epistemic ruptures of modernity.

Core Thesis

Ultimately, the article argues that Weber's nation appears less as a concrete political concept or ideological standpoint than in the function of a cultural system. This reading allows for a re-evaluation of nationalist semantics—not merely as ideological expressions, but as symptomatic responses to the knowledge conditions of early modernity. The paper thus contributes to a research tradition that understands nationalism as a secular substitute for religion—from Carlton Hayes' *Nationalism as a Religion* (1926) to Norbert Elias's diagnosis of nationalism as "the most powerful belief system of the 19th and 20th centuries" (Elias 1992, own translation). Its specific contribution lies in applying Anderson's perspective to Weber's work and addressing the epistemic and cultural conditions that shape his thinking on the nation.

Conclusion

In summary, the **thesis** of this work is that through the lens of the "nation as a cultural system", Weber's ambivalent efforts to understand the meaning of the nation can be plausibilized as an expression of historically situated knowledge. From this perspective, Weber's ambiguous understanding of the nation is a reflection of the historical and cultural conditions under which the nation emerged as a political actor in the 19th century.

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