TWO CONCEPTS OF POLITICS
Conceptual History and Present Controversies

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In contemporary debates we may distinguish a number of individual *conceptions* of politics, which, however, can be understood as versions of combinations of two and only two *concepts* of politics. I will call the two the sphere-concept and the activity-concept. Although they on most occasions are closely intertwined, they refer to two distinct concepts, both of which are regularly evoked but seldom clearly distinguished from each other either in the daily or in the academic debate on politics as a concept. The sphere concept arose from the need to demarcate politics from other fields or sectors, 'the political system' currently serving as the main metaphor. The conceptualization of the activity of politics refers to its qualification as a contingent, controversial and temporal phenomenon from different perspectives, which are here discussed as rhetorical *topoi* for the activity of politics. In this article I want to discuss the strange character of speaking about politics, to elucidate the opposition between the two concepts of politics by illustrating their internal history, range of variation and then discuss the indirect style of the contemporary debates on the concepts of politics.

Keywords: conceptual history; contested concepts; intertextuality; politics; politics-as-activity; politics-as-sphere; spatial and temporal metaphors.

Controversies on politics

Today politics or the political is a paradigmatic example of a controversial concept, of which we hardly can speak without asking 'in which sense' it is used or 'in which respect' it has been thematized in the actual context. Speaking of a 'dominant' view in the present or past underrates the diversity of perspectives on politics that have been available since at least the early twentieth century. What appears as 'politicization' for some, is called 'depoliticization' by others and vice versa (for Weber and Schmitt see Palonen, 1998: 226–9). In order to make the politics vocabulary applicable at all, its users should be required to explicate their specific meaning and point of using the concept, as is the case with many other controversial concepts, such as freedom and equality, democracy and republic and so on.

A special feature of the characteristics of conceptual debates on politics lies in their low level of intertextuality. The discussion does not so much concern definite past or contemporary views on politics, but the authors tend to pick up 'real' examples that seemingly support their own views. In a sense, this is a further manifestation of the priority of political life over political theorizing, according to the central thesis of Quentin Skinner in his *Foundations* (see Skinner, 1978, vol. 1: xi). This low level of intertextuality has, however, led to an almost

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complete lack of historical sense when academic textbooks speak on politics
and when political agents occasionally reflect upon it.

A consequence of the low intertextuality in the debates on politics lies in the
indirect character of the thematization of the concept. The straightforward
questions 'What is politics?' or 'What do we mean by politics?' are very seldom
presented in English or French sources, unlike in German texts. However, also
in Germany the numerous answers to the *Was ist Politik?*-question in encyclo-
paedias, handbooks, introductory textbooks and so on tend to be trivial and
unhistorical. More interesting answers may be found in texts dealing with per-
formative questions, such as 'How do we act, when we act politically'.

The present-day debates surrounding politics seem to mark two opposite
unhistorical tendencies. Above all, it is for contemporary writers and agents dif-
ficult to understand the relative novelty of the controversies on conceptualizing
politics, which have taken place in a more systematic manner only since the
last third of the nineteenth century. In addition, since the 1960s we have seen
numerous attempts to present 'new concept(ion)s of politics', which are regu-
larly written without any systematic knowledge of the huge literature on the
topic since around 1900. The conceptual history of the controversies around
politics, as I have practised it since the 1980s, serves here as a *Verfremdungseffekt*
in relation to the unhistorical contemporary debates (for a more detailed view
see Palonen, 2006).

Today we can find a range of varying and seemingly unrelated conceptions
of politics. Contemporary authors recognize, however, the duplicity of politics
as a 'field' and an 'activity' (see Dunn, 2000: 4–5). These titles refer, indeed, to
two different *concepts* of politics, the sphere-concept and the activity-concept. It
is my thesis that there are only two main alternatives to the concept of politics,
both harbouring great variation. In this essay I analyze the conceptual debate
concerning politics since the nineteenth century as a struggle between these
two concepts of politics, their different versions and combinations. I will limit
my discussion to a concise presentation of these two conceptual alternatives,
their range of variation and their internal history. Before entering into that
discussion I will make a remark on an older temporal layer, the politics-as-disci-
pline, of which some signs are still visible, but which became completely obso-
lete already in the early twentieth century.

The discipline-concept and its replacement

The Greek vocabulary of the *polis* has successfully resisted vernacularization.
Attempts to translate it into new literate languages, such as nineteenth century
Finnish (see Palonen, 2001), were swiftly abandoned. This despite the fact that
the Greek term *polites* was replaced by terms derived from the Roman civis or
by vernacular terms, such as *Bürger* in German.

Nonetheless, despite for example Hannah Arendt's (1968: 154) claims, we
cannot speak of continuity in the meaning of the term political from the Greeks
to the present. On the contrary, Aristotle's *Tà politikà* refers to a discipline deal-
ing with 'questions that concern the polis,' and its translation as *Politics* is defi-

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nitely an anachronism. The quasi-Aristotelian discipline of *Politica* survived in the medieval and early modern universities as an umbrella discipline for questions dealing with government, administration and later the state, for example in the German *Polizeiwissenschaft* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (see Brückner, 1977). The question of what is 'politics' or 'political' did not arise within this concept (see for example Sellin, 1978; Viroli, 1992; Rubinstein, 1987).

During the eighteenth century a trend toward the demarcation of the phenomena from each other gained ground. One consequence was that attempts were made to inject new meaning into the terms 'politics' and 'political'. The old umbrella discipline of politics was split into the disciplines of ethics, economics and politics, which needed also to be distinguished from the fields of law and jurisprudence. This is perhaps best illustrated by the expression *droit politique* in the works of Montesquieu (1748) and Rousseau (1762). Through this process of differentiation the discipline of politics also acquired a distinct sphere of its own. Through contamination, analogous to the case of the transition of 'history' from the title of the narrative to a title used to express 'past events and processes,' (see Koselleck et al., 1975) politics, too, metamorphosized into a phenomenon that was initially to be referred to in terms parallel to the discipline-concept ('practical' and 'theoretical' politics).

Within the 'art' version of the discipline of politics that followed the *phronesis* of Aristotle, the adjective politic refers to 'cunningness,' as the French (*fin, adroit, prudent*) and German (*klug, listig, schlau*) terms refer to the quality of a person, which could also concern the private sphere (see e.g. Sternberger, 1978). Although this 'subjectivization' of politics was frequently regarded as improper, it played a key role in the replacement of the discipline-concept. The subjective colour of the English term *policy* was incorporated into *la politique* in French and *die Politik* in German. Whereas *les politiques* of the sixteenth century still referred to a group of theorists, as did Harrington's description (1656) of Machiavelli as the 'onely politician' who upheld the ancient prudence, *politician* in David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* from 1740 already refers to an agent (Hume, 1740).

The discipline-concept of politics was replaced, mainly over the course of the nineteenth century, by two alternative concepts referring to a definite phenomenon of politics, not only to the subject matter of an academic discipline (see esp. Vollrath, 1989). Since then, politics has referred either to a sphere or an activity. Initially, the qualification of the activity of politics was seen limited to the sphere of politics, but with the backing of the 'art of politics' the tradition could also be extended beyond its borders. Even the numerous attempts to achieve a 'scientification of politics' in the nineteenth century presupposed that politics referred to a phenomenon that must be qualified as scientific (for the contrast of art and science of politics see Palonen, 1985: 34–41, 1990: 25–31). Emile Giraud (1966: 470) offers us an illuminating example of how the discipline-concept was turned into an obsolete mode of speaking: for him, the confusion between politics and the science of politics is comparable to morphing the criminal with the criminologist. The horizon of the politics-as-discipline has been lost.

The sphere-concept of politics

My distinction between the sphere- and activity-concepts is strictly analytic insofar as the same persons may indeed contribute to both concepts. The main difference refers to an opposition between the use of spatial and temporal metaphors in the conceptualization of the fluid phenomenon of politics.

The point of the sphere-concept lies in approaching politics as a spatial phenomenon. Its proponents aim at a certain regulation and stabilization of the hazardous contingency of the *fortuna* (see Pocock, 1975). Politics refers to a distinct metaphoric space. Especially in the older literature, politics was described through the application of rather simple metaphors, in particular as a sphere, sector, field, domain or realm. In the twentieth century, abstract figures, such as the theatrical metaphors of arena, stage or scene, gained ground (for the French debates see Palonen, 1990: 99–102).

The need for a spatial differentiation of politics corresponds to the eighteenth and nineteenth century trend of referring to the division of labour on the basis of exchange or of functions. The old unity of the *societas civilis sive politica* was replaced by the separation of the social and the economic from the political, later followed by the tendency to separate the political sphere from the better known spheres, such as religion, morals, law or administration. The residual political sphere was thus low in the ranking of spheres, although its demarcation gave it a certain level of legitimacy among other spheres; as a sphere, politics was not simply arbitrary. Both these aspects are present for example in Guizot's (1821) discussions of 'political justice'.

It is in the juridical debates around the 'political' status that the demarcation of the political sphere still has its concrete impact on the fates of individual lives. Legal scholars have longed for the possibility to draw a clear-cut dividing line between 'political' and 'juridical' questions. In the Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907 some representatives proposed a list of 'non-political' questions in international relations, which was decided by a majority vote. In his early work Hans Morgenthau (1929, 1933) parodies such attempts and illustrates the intertwining of political and juridical questions in international disputes.

In the nineteenth century debates on the 'political' character of associations, the extension of the political character served as a criterion of exclusion, for example of women and young people from party membership (see Korn, 1922; Huard, 1996). In the contemporary juridical struggles on the political status of criminals, prisoners, refugees and asylum-seekers, on the contrary, the authorities tend to favour the narrow and the individuals concerned a broad demarcation of the political in advocating their case (see Riila, 1993).

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the English terms 'public' and 'political' were seen as virtually synonymous and politics was practically identified with the public sphere. However, the increase in governmental activities meant that the 'public' was no longer something that could be taken for granted, and distinguishing the borderlines of politics became problematic. Both then and now, typical discourses of the sphere-concept concern the merits and de-merits of both the narrow and broad interpretation of politics as well as the distinction between politics in the ordinary and extended sense. Over the

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course of the twentieth century the old core of the public sphere for politics was exhausted. Against this tendency, Hannah Arendt (1958/60) and Michael Oakeshott (1975), for example, insist on the distinctive values of the public sphere, such as its openness to political competition.

In the German nineteenth century literature politics was identified with the state rather than with the public sphere. This view took for granted that the juridical person of the state is the only legitimate subject of its policies, as opposed to the open competition in the public sphere. In extreme versions, the state was assigned a morality of its own (Treitschke, 1897), whereas in more moderate versions a balance between expedience and morality was required (Meinecke, 1924). For the *raison d'État* concepts it was interstate politics that enjoyed the priority. During the twentieth century some theorists replaced the link to the state with more abstract concepts within the spatial understanding of politics. Here we can mention Weber's (1922) 'political association' (*politischer Verband*), Laski's grammar of politics (1925) or Schmitt's 'political unit' (*politische Einheit*) (1932).

Carl Schmitt also offered his famous distinction between Freund and Feind as the criterion of the political, which was no *Sachgebiet* of its own but a more abstract demarcation of 'the political' in a manner different from 'the economic', 'the moral' and so on (Schmitt, 1932: esp. 26–7). His distinction has remained at the core of the debates on the political until today, including the work of a number of post-Marxist thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2005). It has the heuristic advantage of a clear-cut dividing line, but the demand of reducing all political questions to either-or-questions implies a polemical dissociation from all views that play with the blurring of distinctions.

The most fashionable metaphor in the post-war academic political science, however, has been the *political system* (see Easton, 1953). With this metaphor both the subordination of politics under the 'society' and the claim that politics is a 'leading' sphere or 'function' within it was made possible. In the Anglophone textbooks of political science this Eastonian metaphor is still probably the most frequently referred figure (see Enroth, 2004), and politicians with an academic background in the social sciences also tend to favour the system metaphor.

As a general tendency among the thinkers of the political sphere since the 1970s we can detect a tendency toward extending 'the boundaries of the political' (see Maier, 1987). This can be understood either as extending the margins well beyond the 'ordinary' polity or as a rethinking of the core of the political with other kinds of figures than being a 'system' among others. Recently for example political sociologists have revised the spherical thinking from within. Anthony Giddens's 'life politics' (1994) and Ulrich Beck's 'sub-politics' (1993) detect the political dimension beyond the system sphere by introducing a supplementary counter-concept, which allows Beck to regard politics as a double game (*Doppeltheater*).

Niklas Luhmann has rehabilitated the system thinking from a different perspective, namely by insisting on the dependence of systems upon their environment (*Umwelt*), thus rendering the 'politics of society' much more contingent than the previous systems theorists a la Easton (see Luhmann, 2000). In the

case of Luhmann this also has a normative tone in emphasizing the loss of the leading or guiding role of the polity, that is the state-centred regulatory primacy of the political sphere over others.

A kind of second-order spatiality plays a key role in the recent French conceptions of politics. In the post-war years, Paul Ricœur (1957) and Julien Freund (1965) actualized the Schmittian figure of *le politique*, 'the political,' as a criterion, as opposed to politics as an activity. Later for example Régis Debray (1981), Claude Lefort (1986) and Pierre Rosanvallon (2003) continued this line from different perspectives (for the 'post-Heideggerian' discussion on the political see Marchart, 2003).

What, then, constitutes the political? Here each of the authors tends to propose their own conceptions. The point seems to be, that *la politique* consisting of struggles between politicians and parties in elections, parliaments and government should be transcended in the name of something 'deeper' and more stable, by 'the political, ' as for example Ricœur, Freund and Debray clearly emphasize.

Chantal Mouffe in her latest book makes a clear distinction between the political (*le politique*) and politics (*la politique*): 'by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions, through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political'. Or, as she puts it in Heideggerian terms 'politics refers to the 'ontic' level while 'the political has to do with the 'ontological' one' (Mouffe, 2005: 8–9). The link of politics to ontology and order appears, from the perspective of conceptual history, as a clear sign of the primacy of the spatial over the temporal perspective.

Post-Nietzschean Anglophone theorists have distanced themselves from the stabilizing tendencies of the spatial metaphors for politics, as exemplified in the book titles of William Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (1991), and Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993). Both refer to borderlines or movements in the space and not to activity in the strict sense. Perhaps also Frank Ankersmit's (1997) insistence on the role of the 'aesthetic gap' between the representatives and the represented as key to politics could be included among the attempts to rethink the sphere of politics, although it from the opposite angle refers to an activity concept.

It is thus possible to speak of an internal history of the concept of politics-as-sphere (for an academic discussion see Enroth, 2004). We can detect a tendency away from a simple demarcation of the sphere allowing a definite answer to the question, whether a phenomenon 'belongs' to the sphere of politics or not. Nowadays even the spatial metaphors of politics tend to be more abstract and leave, in consequence, more room for contested interpretations. We cannot expect to get rid of the debates on the 'borders' of politics, but are moved from the question of where the borders are located, to what constitutes a borderline for the metaphorical space of the political.

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The activity-concept of politics

The relationship between the sphere- and activity-concepts of politics is partly that between a spatial and a temporal style of thinking competing with each other. In addition, we can speak of different degrees of abstraction in the thematization of politics: the spatial metaphors refer to quasi-natural lines of demarcations or to more abstract divisions of spheres, whereas speaking of politics as an activity refers to something that is not visible by 'the bare eye', but must always be interpreted as politics. As Reinhart Koselleck (1972: 15) writes, time is not *anschaulich*, visible by the bare eye, but metaphorical: the temporal character of activity is only realizable by reinterpreting originally spatial figures in a temporal mode, through a temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) of concepts.

As opposed to the stress on the 'depth' of the political as both a root and a limit of the activity of politics, it is the contingency of the activity itself that serves as the heuristic point of departure in the intelligibility of politics for the activity-concept. The point is, as Bernard Crick (1962: 25) puts it: 'Politics is an activity, not a thing'. But regarding how to conceptualize the fluid and contingent activity, we may propose different perspectives, different rhetorical *topoi* of thematizing that what is crucial in the activity of politics.

The contingent activity of politics is both a time-consuming phenomenon and operates by applying temporal items and distinctions. I will discuss a number of historically relevant *topoi* as perspectives rendering the fluid temporality of the activity of politics intelligible. The activity-concept has predominantly been thematized by politicians as well as by journalists and scholars writing on politicians. For academic theorists, the performative dimension of politics, politicking, only appears as the main phenomenon in exceptional cases.

Politics has been reconceptualized in temporal terms from different perspectives since the early nineteenth century. Among the earliest thinkers who in a relatively consistent fashion refer to politics as an activity are Carl v. Clausewitz (1832) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1835). It is, however, only after a certain degree of both democratization and parliamentarization of politics in the last third of the nineteenth century that different *topoi* for thematization of politics in terms of activity become more systematic, more or less simultaneously, although with different emphases, in Britain, France and Germany (see Palonen, 1985, 1990, 2006). A good example of the new understanding of the problems involved in the concept was what Albert Schäffle wrote in 1897 his article on the concept due to the demands of the readers of the *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, for which he served as the editor (Schäffle, 1897).

One *topos* with historical links both to the old prudential vocabulary and the fierce nineteenth century disputes on 'political capacities' of voters lies in the understanding of the activity in terms of political judgment. In the context of the enfranchisement and parliamentarism debates this *topos* referred to quasi-natural competence criteria for politicians, as emphasized for example by Bismarck and his admirers. Other versions of political judgment insist on the role of tact (Plessner, 1924: 107) or craftsmanship (Oliver, 1934: 1) as well as on the necessity to judge in the absence of sufficient grounds, as a situation demands competent political judgment. Max Weber's Bismarckian figure of *Augenmaß*

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(1919: 73–4) illustrates one example of this aspect, whereas Hannah Arendt (1978) takes the Kantian *erweiterte Denkungsart* as a paradigm for judging situations for which no precedent exists as the point of departure.

Following the early art metaphors of politics we can also speak of policy-conceptions of politics that are based on the coordination and organization of singular measures into a future-oriented activity, into a form of policy that follows a 'line'. The Neo-Kantians qualified levels of the normative control of the activity of politics (for example Nelson, 1924) in order to oppose the *Real-politik* adaptation of the normative demands regarding what is surely possible (Rochau, 1853/69). From an activity-based perspective we can see attempts to strike a balance between normative and teleological judgements in both Friedrich Meinecke's singularized *Staatsräson* (1924) and R.G. Collingwood's (esp. 1942) highly nuanced policy-conceptions. Bertrand de Jouvenel distinguished *une politique* as *policy* from *la politique* as *politics* as activities of contestation that preceded decision and served as the line that was adopted in the moment of decision (1955: 27–8).

A key *topos* of speaking of politics in performative terms lies in persuasive deliberation. This is an indispensable aspect of the understanding of parliamentary and electoral practices. Walter Bagehot's identification of 'politics or discussion' (1872: 135) is a classical expression of the deliberative view that discussion can alter agents' standpoints. This view was shared by proponents of parliamentary government in the French Third Republic, such as Eugène Pierre (1896) and Louis Barthou (1923) emphasizing the rhetorical aspect of politics. Max Weber accentuated the competence of a parliamentary politician to estimate the effect of his words (1917b: 187) and insisted on the centrality of the rhetorical role of the recruitment of allies and adherents for a politician engaged in a struggle (1918: 232). Beyond parliaments and elections, for example George Catlin's ideal type of 'political man' attempts 'to direct the wills of others' (1927: 215), and Bertrand de Jouvenel regards the possibility to persuade another person to carry out a definite act as the microscopic core of politics (1963: 12, 107). Similarly, J.D.B. Miller argues that 'it is the distinctive job of the politician to seek arrangements of persuasion and compromise' (1958: 5), and Hannah Arendt compared politics with the performing arts, in which 'the virtuosity of performance is decisive' (1968: 177). More recently, the speech act theory and rhetoric have played a key role in the understanding of politics as activity (see Nelson, 1998, and the essays in Skinner, 2002).

Commitment is another classical *topos* of the activity-concept. There is a strong tradition to determine politics in terms of the will. For William Kay Wallace, politics '...is a means of realizing the aims and plans of an individual or general will' (1924: 15). This view is rephrased in terms of regarding politics in the Nietzschean manner as an expression of *Wille zur Macht*. Hans Morgenthau, for example, distinguishes in this style between three types of politics: 'This lust for power manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it or to demonstrate it' (1946: 192). In Weimar Germany, the voluntaristic language was the target of opposition from the decisionists. Most famous among them is Carl Schmitt's 'Unterscheidung zwischen Freund und Feind' as the criterion of the political (1932: 26), in which

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the adherence of one's enemies and friends is decided from above, without even asking them. However, Helmuth Plessner turns the Schmittian distinction into a self-committed choice when he extends politics to the life of the individual, which consists of living in a situation of choice between for and against, 'in einer Situation des Für und Wider zu leben' (1931: 195). This 'existentialist' view of decision is prominent in the work of Karl Jaspers (1932), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1947) and Jean-Paul Sartre. In the middle of the 1960s Sartre speaks of politics as a 'dimension of person' (Sartre, 1964) and emphasizes that in the elections we don't choose only a candidate but also 'ourselves', that is a certain vision of our own political identity (Sartre, 1991).

Contestation refers to a *topos* that aims at the opening of a situation by the politicization of closed commitments. Contestation revaluates the conflict and struggle as liberating elements from the tyranny of unity and order, and it is in exactly this sense that Weber in particular repeatedly insisted on the *Kampf* character of politics (see esp. Weber, 1918). British journalist Philip Cambray also writes: 'To regard the Opposition as merely mistaken in its ideas and not as deliberately dangerous is wholly subversive of the will to win' (1932: 12). This became more acceptable in post-war political science (see Miller, 1962) as well in the work of Sartre (1960), who insists on the centrality of the role of scarcity in history. Sartre is also one of the sources of the militantly contestation-oriented 'alternative' or feminist politics of the late sixties and seventies, with its demands of politicization and practices of direct action. However, in recent academic theorizing of the contestational dimension of politics, Foucault and other post-Nietzschean thinkers seem to have played a more crucial role (see Butler and Scott, 1992; Connolly, 1991; and Honig, 1993 from this perspective). Jacques Rancière especially emphasizes the contestational dimension in *la politique*, opposing the egalitarian contingency to the natural order, seeing in politics an act of subjectivation and désidentification (Rancière, 1995: 38, 57–8).

Three further *topoi* of activity – possibility, situation and play & game – take dealing with contingency as their point of departure in their conceptualization of politics. The Bismarckian formula of politics as a *Kunst des Möglichen* originally alluded to a *Realpolitik*-style demand to a politics of adaptation. In the wake of criticizing the *Realpolitik*, however, Max Weber, amongst others, turned it upside down by expressing the demand of the impossible as a situation characteristic of politics (Weber, 1917a: 514). For Weber (1906), objective possibilities in history and the politician's omnipresent chances for action are more real than the analytical limit-situation of reality, a product of past or future political struggles. His famous 'definition' of politics as a struggle over power shares (see Weber, 1919: 36) should be linked to his view on power as a specific type of *Chance* (Weber, 1922: 28). A number of politicians and authors (for example Oliver, 1934) did not shy way from the rehabilitation of 'opportunism'. The widely used navigation metaphors, such as Michael Oakeshott's famous metaphor of sailing 'a boundless and bottomless sea' (1951: 60), also refer to opportunism as a play with the contingent situation.

The temporal character of politics is immediate in the situation-conceptions of politics. They refer to the increasing lack of time that was already discernable in the parliamentary politics of the late nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin

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formulated the dual character of the timeliness of politics as both a constraint and a chance by insisting on the role of mastering the play with deadlines for politics: 'Nur in Terminen rechnet der wahre Politiker' (1928: 77). Benjamin and others also speak of both the *Kairos*, a unique opportunity which is easy to miss (see Sulzbach, 1921: 136; Plessner, 1924: 124–5), and a weather sense as a sense for the demands of time (Benjamin, 1940: 258–9; Oliver, 1934: 113). In contrast, for example Henry Fairlie alludes to the more regular use of occasions by a party leader, who 'must have the courage to await the right time, as well as to seize real opportunities boldly when they present themselves' (1968: 68). We can also count the Arendtian emphasis on the 'new beginning' as the key to politics-as-activity (1958/60) or Oakeshott's emphasis on the response to a contingent situation (1975) as referring to the situational *topos* of politics. The situational views also tend to dispute the primacy of the future in favour of a conception that is present-oriented and even aimed at the rehabilitation of past possibilities, such as the Benjaminian figures of *Jetztzeit* and *Aktualisierung* (1940).

The play and game metaphors of contingency have been especially prominent in British literature. For Cambray (1932), the strategic game is an analytic tool, which facilitates an improved understanding of politics within the Westminster style two-party system. Eugène Pierre insisted that for a politician the main point is not what he gains but rather 'le jeu pour le jeu' (1896: 60). Some authors defend the fascination with games that extend to the extreme situations of gambling (see for example Schwoboda, 1912), whereas others insist instead on the omnipresent playing situations, as opposed to serious 'work'. This is the case for example with Oakeshott, for whom the playful component is nowhere 'more clearly present than in the various levels of political activity' (1996: 111). Plessner's concept of the *Öffentlichkeit* is based on the activity of *Spiel*, to which his view on politics as situated diplomacy is closely connected (1924: esp. 101, 124). Sartre (1960: esp. 882–5) attributes a subversive dimension to politics by assigning to *déjouer*, the activity of outplaying one's adversary and of derailing the policies in a given situation, a key role in his entire understanding of the activity of politics.

Within the activity-concept of politics we can also distinguish certain conceptual innovations and shifts of emphasis. The perspectivistic understanding of politics has led to emphasizing one-sidedly certain aspects of activities as its distinctly political qualities. In the course of the nineteenth century the activity of politics tended to remain conceptualized within the sphere of the governmental and parliamentary politics, whereas in the twentieth century it is linked to the understanding of the presence of political moment of any activity. In this sense for example Kurt Hiller (1913) attributes a priority to the 'literary politics' over the 'parliamentary politics'; Max Weber uses the figure of 'occasional politician' (1919: 41); both Dolf Sternberger (1947: 74) and Bertrand de Jouvenel (1955: 7) emphasise that every citizen of today has acted politically in various situations. The point lies in the construction of new types of reading activities politically. Or, to put it differently, the older activity concepts emphasize the politicking within the conventional polity, whereas in the course of the twentieth century the different aspects of politicization have both opened new *Spielzeiträume* for politicking and reorganized the old ones.

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The contemporary horizons of debate

In the current situation, no real debate is underway between the spatial and temporal conceptions, or even within the two main types of understanding politics. The older variants of politics-as-sphere play a partly administrative role in restricting the use of the concept, for example in the legal disputes. When the political aspect is recognized as concerning any phenomenon in principle, for example the weather-related results of global warming, it does not make sense to demarcate political and non-political phenomena. In addition, both policy-conceptions and judgments based on the personal characteristics of politicians sound at least partially outmoded in comparison with, for example, the modes of reading situations.

In historical terms, the aforementioned shift from the 'what is politics'-questions to those of 'what are we doing when acting politically' requires us to acknowledge that politicians and journalists have been keen to revise the vocabulary and meaning of politics, whereas academics have been reluctant to adopt these innovations. As part of their own activity, politicians are, for example, obliged to analyze situations and their inherent paradoxes, estimate the level of urgency and play with limited times (on politicians as theorists of politics see Palonen, 2005: 359–63). Here I have mainly discussed the writings on politicians rather than in the politicians' self-descriptions of their own activity, but we could guess that in the debates among politicians also conceptual innovations about politics could be detected by a careful conceptual historical style of reading them.

The Schmittian and post-structuralist emphasis on 'the political' tends to remain remote from the daily political struggles and is thus liable to lose the priority of political agency over theorizing. The activity-conceptions, while they might also need revision in order to become better suited to the indirect forms of action, take into account aspects of the Luhmannian and post-structuralist critique. Frank Ankersmit's point that politicians' creativity is a corollary of the acceptance of the aesthetic gap between the represented and the representatives (2002: 116–8) can be regarded as an example of such an action-at-a-distance conception of politics. The visual and electronic forms of political practices similarly call for a kind of 'action-at-distance' that also deserves to be problematized (see Virilio, 1995, however with nostalgic tones against radical timeliness).

It has been fashionable since the 1970s to search for 'new politics'. This slogan might have different levels of ambition regarding whether it refers to contents, forms or conceptions of politics. From the perspective of conceptual history new innovations during this period have been scarce; the alleged novelties rather appear as reformulations of certain older *topoi*. Even the feminist slogans of 'the personal is political' and 'politics in the first person' have clear parallels to German expressionist literati prior to World War I (see Hiller, 1913; Rubiner, 1912).

The acceptance of contingency, of the condition that it is always possible to act differently in politics, has become a common topic in contemporary debates

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on politics in recent literature. This has not, however, diminished the conflicts within these debates, as both the concept of contingency and the role it plays in politics have been conceptualized in widely different manners. For normative theorists, such as John Rawls (1993), contingency remains a residual that cannot be eliminated, whereas for Luhmann contingency marks the 'Limitationalität' of the system (2000: 120). In William Connolly's Nietzchean view, 'globalized contingency' (1991: 24–7) is a healthy reminder of the failure of all plans for mastery, whereas in Ulrich Beck's (1993) concept risk plays the dual role of danger and chance. A performative role is attributed to contingency in Bonnie Honig's (1993) Arendtian view on the politics of virtuosity and in Michael Greven's (1999) Weberian view on politicization in terms of the omnipresence of the need for decisions.

In the older conceptions of politics many intellectual resources could still be evoked in the present. We could for example extend the Weberian idealtypes of the professional and occasional politician outside the conventional politysphere. I can imagine for the occasional politician the paradigm of understanding oneself as an MP of the election day, choosing both one's political identity anew at each election and among candidates rather the person whom one considers to be the most competent player in the parliament.

As a mirror figure we could speak of the professional politician of daily life. By this I refer to the ideal type of a person making conscious and provocative choices on a number of levels concerning lifestyles in a manner resembling a competent parliamentary politician. Such a person is suspicious of officials and critical of authorities, and cannot easily accept the routines of daily life, even if questioning them makes life more complicated. To speak of politics as an activity requires the attention to the exemplary doings of professional politicians as well as to the activities of all and any of us when acting as politicians.

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