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Submitting “Alternative Facts” to Debate: A Weberian Perspective on Post-truth Politics

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Abstract

Oxford Dictionaries chose “post-truth” as the “Word of the Year 2016”, while the association of German linguists (Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache) did the same for “*postfaktische Politik*”. “Alternative facts”, launched by Kellyanne Conway concerning the attendance at Donald Trump’s inaugural, was a third variant in this cluster. In this article, I shall discuss Max Weber’s parliamentary perspective on the critique of given facts and of the powers of science in relation to the debates around post-truth politics. A critical assessment of Leo Strauss’s critique of Weber as a nihilist and relativist introduces the problematic. One aim of the article is to illustrate how even trivial slogans can be situated in the history of political concepts, political theory and rhetoric.

Keywords: Alternative facts, Leo Strauss, Max Weber, nihilism, parliamentary debate, post-truth politics, relativism, scholarly debate

“Post-truth” was chosen as the “Word of the Year 2016” by *Oxford Dictionaries* (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>). “*Postfaktische Politik*” was the choice of the Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache, also in 2016 (<http://gfds.de/wort-des-jahres-2016/>). A third variant in the same cluster of slogans are “alternative facts”, coined by Kellyanne Conway of president Donald Trump’s staff. Aaron Blake wrote “Kellyanne Conway says Donald Trump’s team has ‘alternative facts.’ Which pretty much says it all” (Washington Post, 22 January 2017). While the three slogans are by no means identical (see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postfaktische_Politik), they deserve to be discussed together.

Paul-Erik Korvela discussed the problematic already in the Editorial of *Redescriptions* 19:2. My aim in this essay is to problematise the conceptual cluster of “truth”, “facts” and “alternative facts”. I also want to apply the resources of a parliamentary scholar to the relationships between political and scholarly debate (see the Editorial of Haapala and Palonen in *Redescriptions* 20:1, 2017). The current trend to rehabilitate “the cult of facts”, as Quentin Skinner writes on Geoffrey Elton (2002, chapter 2), against their devaluation in post-modernism, in the rhetorical turn and in other critiques of positivism and scientism, also warrants criticism. The discarding of facts as well as their idolisation are part of a “rhetoric of reaction” in the sense of Albert O. Hirschman (1991).

Was Weber a Nihilist?

Max Weber has from time to time been accused of being a nihilist or a relativist or both. Such accusations arise either from those for whom facts are given (and not made, as the Latin *factum*) or from those who claim that there exists an “objective truth” beyond politics and history. The most famous text, in which, indeed, both critiques of Weber are included, is German-American philosopher Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (1953), written in a time in which no extensive and historically oriented Weber scholarship yet existed. A discussion of Strauss’s accusations of Weber being a nihilist and relativist offers us a good introduction to controversies over truth and fact.

In the following passage, Strauss, based on his on paraphrasing of Weber, claims that the implications of Weber’s thinking are nihilistic.

... the true value system does not exist; there are a variety of values which are of the same rank, whose demand conflict with one another, and whose cannot solved by human reason. Social science or social philosophy cannot do more than clarify the conflict and all its implications; the solution is to be left to the free, non-rational decision of each individual.

I contend that Weber’s thesis necessarily leads to nihilism or to the view that every preference, however evil, base or insane, has to be judged before the tribunal of human reason to be as legitimate as any other preference. (Strauss, 1953: 41–42)

Perhaps Strauss’s point could be reformulated into a form familiar to present-day debates. All questions of values would then be only a matter of “preference” or opinion, and there exist no “reason” to evaluate or to rank the opinions. Weber definitely does not identify values (*Werte*) with opinions or preferences (*Meinungen*). On the contrary, he affirms in his famous “Objektivität” essay (1904) that “*Kritik macht vor den Werturteilen nicht halt*”, “criti-

cism does not stop before value judgements” (Weber, 1904: 149, translation in Weber, 2012: 102). This criticism might consist of confronting some value judgments against others, but it can also point to an interpretation of facts that includes consequences, which could be used to challenge the desirability of given values.

Strauss correctly claims that, for Weber, reason – *Vernunft* – is not a supreme authority leading to definite conclusions beyond debate. The ground for this is political. There cannot be any single best policy line or best argument that would justify silencing all objections, and therefore it is a matter of political actors to debate and decide upon the question in a definite situation. In his *Wahlrecht* essay (1917), Weber condemns the attempts to replace parliament, parties, elections as well as universal and equal suffrage with systems in which the votes are weighed, not counted. Democratisation and parliamentarisation has led to a political change in which the number of votes triumphs over the “reason”, that is the weight of interests:

Jene offiziellen berufsständischen Organisationen ... sind, politisch angesehen, Gebilde, dazu bestimmt, daß ihre Äußerungen: Gutachten oder Resolutionen oder Debatten, *gewogen* und *nicht gezählt* werden. Und sie werden, je nach dem *sachlichen* Gehalt ihrer Äußerungen, schwerer oder leichter wiegen. *Politische Parteien* sind dagegen im modernen Staat Organisationen, welche auf (rechtlich) “*freie*” Werbung von Anhängern ausgehen und deren Ziel ist: durch die *Zahl* ihrer Anhänger die Politik zu bestimmen: die *ultima ratio* aller modernen Parteipolitik ist der Wahl- oder Stimmzettel. (Weber, 1917b: 167)

From a political point of view, the official organisations representing occupational groups ... are formations intended to have their utterances – expert opinions, resolutions or debates – *weighed* and *not counted*. More or less weight will be attached to them, depending on the substantive (*sachlich*) content of their utterances. By contrast, *political parties* in the modern state are organisations which have as their starting point the (legally) “*free*” recruitment of supporters, while their goal is to determine the policy through the *number* of their supporters. The *ultima ratio* of all modern party politics is voting or the ballot slip. (Weber, 1994: 98–99)

In his time Weber was among the few German academics who saw universal suffrage and fair competition between parties as a great achievement. The *Wahlrecht* essay is a polemic against forms of anti-democratic reaction, such as the Prussian “plutocratic” division of the electorate into three classes according to taxation, the Belgian type of plural voting (academic degree, children and property providing additional votes), and proposals to replace the elected parliament with a representation of professional corporations (*berufsständische Vertretung*). Against all that, Weber defends the equality of citizens, to which corresponds the principle that votes are to be counted, not weighed:

Denn diese *Gleichheit* des Stimmrechtes entspricht in ihrer “mechanischen” Natur dem Wesen des heutigen Staates. Dem modernen Staat erst gehört der Begriff des “*Staatsbürgers*” an. Und das gleiche Wahlrecht bedeutet zunächst schlechterdings nichts anderes als: daß an diesem Punkt des sozialen Lebens der einzelne einmal *nicht*, wie sonst überall, nach seiner Besonderung in beruflichen und familienhaften Stellungen und nach den Verschiedenheiten seiner materiellen oder sozialen Lage in Betracht kommt, sondern eben nur: *als Staatsbürger*. (ibid.: 170)

The mechanical nature of *equal* voting rights corresponds to the essential nature of today’s state. The modern state is the first to have the concept of “*citizen of the state*” (*Staatsbürger*). Equal voting rights means in the first instance simply this: at this point of social life the individual, for once, is *not*, as he is everywhere else, considered in terms of particular professional and family positions he occupies, but purely and simply *as a citizen*. (Weber, 1994: 103)

The independence of citizens at the ballot box marks not only their equality, but their freedom: a citizen is not dependent on her “social being”, but is a political actor who can choose and change the vote. This is also the reason why electoral results are contingent, i.e. could always be different. Otherwise, it would not make sense to speak of free and fair elections. We cannot attribute electoral results to any superior “reason”, even if there are still today some so-called epistemic theorists who accuse parliaments and elections of being nihilistic and relativistic and would thereby justify rule by experts for the sake of putatively higher “substantial quality of decisions” (e.g. David Östlund, criticised in Urbinati, 2014: 89–106, quote from 90).

Would Strauss also reject this parliamentary-cum-electoral model of political choice as “nihilistic”? Or would he merely reject its extension to questions of *Weltanschauung* and values, claiming it reduces values to being similar to mere preferences?

The second point could be rephrased as the thesis: “there is no truth, only opinions”. If so, choices between academic theories could also be decided by majority vote, either in a referendum or in a parliament. Regarding historical interpretations, this has sometimes been done, for example, regarding naming the “events” of 1956 in the Hungarian post-Communist parliament. Naming past events should be left to an open debate among historians, a debate that cannot be arbitrarily terminated by a majority or even unanimous vote. Although Weber rejects a Hegelian type of Reason superior to politics, maintaining an open academic debate is consistent with Weber’s perspectivism.

Or a Relativist?

For relating the contrast between Strauss und Weber in the context of post-truth politics, another quote by Strauss on Weber is illuminating:

The idea of science forced him to insist that in fact all science as such is independent of *Weltanschauung*: both natural and social science claims to be equally valid for the Westerners and the Chinese... (ibid.: 38)

Strauss here refers to this well-known passage in Weber’s “*Objektivität*” essay:

Denn es ist und bleibt wahr, daß eine methodisch korrekte wissenschaftliche Beweisführung auf dem Gebiete der Sozialwissenschaften, wenn sie ihren Zweck erreicht haben will, auch von einem Chinesen als richtig anerkannt werden muß oder – richtiger gesagt – daß sie dieses, vielleicht wegen Materialmangels nicht voll erreichbare, Ziel jedenfalls *erstreben* muß, daß ferner auch die *logische* Analyse eines Ideals auf seinen Gehalt und auf seine letzten Axiome hin und die Aufzeigung der aus seiner Verfolgung sich logischer und praktischer Weise ergebenden Konsequenzen, wenn sie als gelungen gelten soll, auch für ihn gültig sein muß, ... Denn eines halten wir für *unsere* Arbeit fest: eine sozialwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift in unserem Sinne soll, soweit sie *Wissenschaft* treibt, ein Ort sein, wo Wahrheit gesucht wird, die – um im Beispiel zu bleiben – auch für den Chinesen die Geltung einer denkenden Ordnung der empirischen Wirklichkeit beansprucht. (Weber, 1904: 155–56)

For it is, and continues to be, true that a methodically correct proof in the field of social science must, in order to have reached its goal, also be accepted as correct even by a Chinese – or, to put it more correctly: that goal must at any rate be striven although it may not be completely attainable because the data are lacking. In the same way, moreover, the logical analysis of an ideal with respect to its contents and its ultimate axioms, and the demonstration of the logical and practical consequences of pursuing this ideal, must also, if it is to be deemed successful, be valid for [a Chinese].... What that contribution might be, however, is in the first instance an epistemological question, to which an answer cannot, and indeed need not for our purposes, be provided here, since the kind of work that we do rests on the following single, firm premise: to the extent that a journal of social science (as we understand it) works scientifically, it must be a place dedicated to seeking [a kind of] truth that can – to stay with our example – even for a Chinese claim to have the validity of an intellectual ordering of empirical reality (Weber, 2012: 105–6).

Strauss seems to realise that Weber explicitly rejects a relativism, according to which truth depends on the socio-cultural location of the judging person, in the sense that Karl Mannheim discusses in *Ideologie und Utopie* (1929). If there were different “logics” for Chinese than for Westerners, this would render any debate between them impossible, similarly to what an imperative mandate

would do for parliamentary debate. But, the contrary being the case does not mean that the participants agree upon “the facts”, only that the standpoints and arguments in a debate over the “facts” should not depend on the socio-cultural background of the debaters.

Weber shares Nietzsche’s view, indebted as it is to the sophist and rhetorical tradition, that there are no facts, but merely interpretations (“*gerade Tatsachen gibt es nicht, nur Interpretationen*”, Nietzsche, *Nachlass*, 1981: 903). Along these lines, Weber emphasises the dependence of facts on interpretative perspectives, as we can find in these two formulae from the “*Objektivität*” essay.

Es gibt keine schlechthin “objektive” wissenschaftliche Analyse des Kulturlebens oder ... der “sozialen Erscheinungen” *unabhängig* von speziellen und “einseitigen” Gesichtspunkten, nach denen sie – ausdrücklich oder stillschweigend, bewußt oder unbewußt – als Forschungsobjekt ausgewählt, analysiert und darstellend gegliedert werden. (Weber, 1904: 170)

Alle Erkenntnis der Kulturwirklichkeit ist, wie sich daraus ergibt, stets ein Erkenntnis unter spezifischen *besonderen Gesichtspunkten*. (ibid.: 181).

There is no absolutely “objective” scientific analysis of cultural life – or (to use a term which is perhaps somewhat narrower but which, for our purposes, does not have an essentially different meaning) of “social phenomena” – independent of special and “one-sided” points of view, according to which [those phenomena] are – explicitly or implicitly, deliberately or unconsciously selected as an object of inquiry, analysed and presented in an orderly fashion. (Weber, 2012: 113)

Consequently, all knowledge of cultural reality is always knowledge from specific and particular points of view. (ibid.: 119)

The emphasis on the value of the one-sidedness also implies that a plurality of perspectives is for Weber a regular practice of the human sciences, and even a condition for speaking of knowledge. In this respect, Weber joins the broader rhetorical tradition, in which the main theorists of Westminster parliamentary politics, John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot, can be included (see Palonen, 2017a).

The plurality of perspectives does not mean a “peaceful coexistence” between them, but an open-ended debate on their interpretations, on judging their strong and weak sides. The aim of academic controversy is neither resolution through a majority vote nor finding a compromise on a “middle course” (Weber, 1904: 154), but to keep the debate between opposed perspectives ongoing. In other words, Weber regards scholarly controversies on

interpretation and on “the facts” connected to them as part and parcel of research practices in the human sciences. Were this not so, the result would be a stagnation of knowledge, *chinesische Erstarrung* (ibid.: 184), as he put it, borrowing from John Stuart Mill’s concept of *Chinese stationariness* (Mill, 1838).

Weber thus emphasises that different ideal-typical interpretations of phenomena are possible, expected and desirable in academic debate. Why does he, then, speak of the “striving for truth” and “quest for truth”?

To answer this question, we must carefully understand how Weber speaks of “truth”. He does not claim that some facts are “true” or “false” in the strong sense of being beyond dispute. “Truth” is for Weber a kind of Kantian regulative idea. If he occasionally says that some state of affairs is “true” or “false”, this must be taken as a rhetorical move in an ongoing debate, not as a move to terminate the debate.

To keep the debate going means that in a scholarly debate it is not legitimate to demand terminating the quest for truth. Any claims that now “the truth has been found” or even “approached”, in any matter whatsoever, indicate for Weber an improper interruption of the game of the human sciences. The search for truth marks for Weber a rhetorical strategy for encouraging continued debating in order to avoid stagnation.

Weber performed a remarkable rhetorical move: he changed the status of the concept of truth from a claim over a state of affairs in the world into regarding the striving after truth as a procedure for conducting debates among scholars. This corresponds to his revision of the concept “objectivity” into one of striving for fair play, for which the Westminster parliamentary procedure provides the historical model (see Palonen, 2010; see also chapters 10 to 12 in Palonen, 2017b).

But does not Weber’s famous *Beruf* lectures in Munich juxtapose politics with scholarship? The opening question of *Politik als Beruf*, presented originally 28 January 1919, was: *Was verstehen wir unter Politik?*, (“How do we understand politics?”, Weber, 1919: 35; Weber, 1994: 309). No similar question of what scholars are doing is asked in *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, which was presented originally as early as 7 November 1917 (see Schluchter, 1994).

If we consider *Wissenschaft* as a human activity, this has for Weber much in common with *Politik*, in particular, the idea that everything can be a matter of debate and controversy. This is best formulated in Weber’s “*Objektivität*” essay, in which Weber offers a rhetorical and parliamentary model for how the endemic scholarly controversies ought to be conducted (see Palonen 2010).

The Audience of Mass Meetings

In the present-day disputes, it is worth looking closer at “alternative facts”. As mentioned above, it was President Donald Trump’s adviser Kellyanne Conway who made the formula widely known.

She defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s false statement about the attendance at Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the United States. When pressed during the interview with Chuck Todd to explain why Spicer “utter[ed] a provable falsehood”, Conway stated that Spicer was giving “alternative facts.” Todd responded, “Look, alternative facts are not facts. They’re falsehoods.” (Blake, *Washington Post* 22.1. 2017)

The formula was, according to the Wikipedia above quoted entry, not strictly a neologism, but nonetheless a rhetorical move that provoked a new debate on post-factual politics. It has been met with ridicule in later debates (see, for example, Hendrick and Westergaard, 2017).

Merely declaring something to be an “alternative fact” would not, of course, be very convincing. In the language of speech act theory, any claim on “alternative facts” is already an illocutionary act, not merely a statement, but a rhetorical move against some other interpretations. Conway does not seem to feel any need to construct an alternative perspective on the matter (i.e. the number of persons attending Trump’s inauguration) in order to make her interpretation of facts more plausible or worth a more detailed debate. Such a task, however, would not have been impossible in principle.

The number of attendants at mass meetings is a major topic in the plebiscitarian-style of politics. It is well known how difficult it is to estimate the number of attendants at demonstrations or mass meetings in an open space. The numbers given by organisers, adversaries, the police and the press tend to differ considerably from each other. It even seems that the techniques for counting such crowds have not improved to any noticeable degree, but today’s numbers differ roughly as much as they differed, say, in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s or early 1970s. It might be argued that the number of people in crowds is a paradigm case for using “alternative facts”, part of the inherent controversies around such meetings.

An approximate judgement – Weber’s *Augenmaß* – could, of course, be applied. The specific space and methods of estimation used would allow some degree of controversy between the interpretations of facts. We can ask simple questions. Who are counted as “attendants”? What are the criteria for counting them? By what methods of estimating have the sides participating in the controversy arrived at their numbers? What kinds of strengths and weaknesses are there in their respective methods of estimation and their criteria of counting?

Mass meetings in an open space could be compared with events requiring entrance tickets, such as football matches or open-air concerts. A famous case, in which the number of tickets was not yet restricted, was the World Cup finale of 1950 between Brazil and Uruguay at the Maracanã Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, in which the estimated number of attendants was over 200 000.

Comparing pictures on the density of people filling the space or in the distance between attendants can allow comparative estimations on the numbers. For example, reports on discomfort due to being in cramped proximity to others would be a sign of a huge crowd, although in enthusiastic crowds the mutual proximity would perhaps be regarded as an advantage (see Sartre 1960 on the *groupe-en-fusion* as an ideal type of such crowds). But did the attendants at the Trump inaugural constitute such a crowd?

We can also discuss the difference between estimations by assuming that the organisers will maximise the number of participants in a mass meeting, whereas the police have a vested interest in downplaying the number in anti-establishment demonstrations. Independent journalists are then justified in avoiding “both extremes” – although they don’t have strong grounds for how to do that. The degree of professionalisation among organisers in making such judgements, acquired through having greater experience with mass meetings, could reduce overestimations of the numbers, and the police can also learn to improve their estimations on the basis of not over- or under-spending their resources. The Trump inaugural organisers might be more amateurish than others at overestimating attendance. Conway does not propose any such thought experiments to justify her estimation. Only by comparing the strong and weak sides of the contrasting judgements, and the plausibility of the competing claims on the “facts” can a more detailed judgement be arrived at.

From a Weberian perspective, we can conclude that “alternative facts” can neither be declared *a priori* as nonsensical nor accepted at their face value. Can we speak of “alternative facts” at all if “facts” depend on interpretations and “facts” of different ideal-typical perspectives remain a matter of debate?

There is a traditional view that regards facts as either true or false. Chuck Todd’s above-quoted expression, “provable falsehood” is understandable as a claim that the arguments against it are so implausible that they are not worth taking seriously at all. This corresponds to the formula of Georges Clemenceau on the origins of WWI, as told by Hannah Arendt in her essay “Truth and Politics”:

During the twenties, so a story goes, Clemenceau, shortly before his death, found himself engaged in a friendly talk with a representative of the Weimar Republic on the question of guilt for the outbreak of the First World War. “What, in your opinion,” Clemenceau was asked, “will future historians think of this troublesome and controversial issue?” He replied “This I don’t know. But I know for certain that

they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.” We are concerned here with brutally elementary data of this kind, whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism. (Arendt, 1968: 300–301)

It is frequently not worth disputing many of the conventional interpretations of facts: agreeing with the adversaries’ judgement about the facts means to focus on other questions behind them. To speak, as Arendt does, of “brutally elementary data”, presupposes, however, something as being inherently given. Frequently, the building of alternative perspective has, however, its origins in disputing such allegedly “elementary data”. In other words, it is always possible to ask the question, “what kind of perspective could allow the facts to be disputed”, and then go forward to construct them. Instead of a consensus on data, we can insist on a dissensus between perspectives, on a “parliamentary theory of knowledge”, as I have called it (see Palonen, 2010, chapter 9, and 2017a).

A “Science of Reality”

One of the best-known phrases in Weber’s “*Objektivität*” essay is his characterisation of the social science that he himself practises as a “science of reality”, eine *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* (Weber, 1904: 170). Many critics and some alleged proponents have misunderstood this formula as a commitment to a facts-based positivism. As Weber presents the concept just after his passage affirming the perspectivism of knowledge, it is clear that he definitely does not claim that “reality” is known or even knowable by means of science, being so inexhaustible that it transcends any attempts to conceptualise it.

Endlos wälzt sich der Strom des unermesslichen Geschehens der Ewigkeit entgegen. Immer neu und anders gefärbt bilden sich die Kulturprobleme, welche die Menschen bewegen, flüssig bleibt, damit der Umkreis dessen, was aus jenem stets gleich unendlichen Strome des Individuellen Sinn und Bedeutung für uns erhält, “historisches Individuum” wird. Es wechseln die Gedankenzusammenhänge, unter denen es betrachtet und wissenschaftlich erfaßt wird. (ibid.: 184)

The immeasurable stream of events flows unendingly towards eternity. The cultural problems that move humankind constantly assume new forms and colourings; within that ever-infinite stream of individual events, the boundaries of the area that acquires meaning and significance for us – which becomes a “historical individual” – therefore remain fluid. The intellectual framework within which it is considered and scientifically comprehended shifts over time. (Weber, 2012: 121)

All attempts to conceptualise “reality” in an exhaustive way are doomed to failure in the face of its constantly changes. Weber with his perspectivism questions the very possibility of speaking of “reality as such”. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to construct ideal-typical perspectives on interpretations on reality. With one-sided ideal types we can only thematise specific aspects of reality, and Weber’s main criterion for selecting what is interesting is *Kulturbedeutung*, “cultural significance”:

Wir wollen die uns umgebende Wirklichkeit des Lebens, in welches wir hineingestellt sind, *in ihrer Eigenart* verstehen – den Zusammenhang und die *Kulturbedeutung* ihrer einzelnen Erscheinungen in ihrer heutigen Gestaltung einerseits, die Gründe ihrer geschichtlichen So-und-nicht-anders-Gewordenseins andererseits. (Weber, 1904: 170–171)

We want to understand the distinctive character of the reality of the life in which we are placed and which surrounds us – on the one hand: the interrelation and the cultural significance and importance of its individual elements they manifest themselves today; and, on the other: the reasons why the[se elements] historically developed as they did and not otherwise. (Weber, 2012: 114)

A major corollary of Weber’s perspectivistic view of knowledge is that scholars must situate themselves in relation to an ongoing debate and choose to study what interests them in it in order to have something to say. For Weber, scholarly disputes concern mainly ideal types in which the contrasting and confronting alternatives is the crux of the matter. The struggles over values, over the *Wertbeziehung* of research, are part of scholarly debate, but the “results”, including interpretations of facts, such as the dating of events or the spelling of names, refer to another type of dispute, concern in Weberian terms *Wertfreiheit* (see Weber, 1917a). In parliamentary language, value commitment relates to disputes on agenda-setting, while the value freedom concerns the items already on the agenda (see Palonen, 2016).

Of course, there are also cases in which the same ideal-typical perspective offers an occasion for debate on alternative interpretations of facts, interpretations that differ, despite being compatible with the perspective. This is analogous to a situation in parliament when the opposition accepts the government’s justification for a motion, but disagrees with the interpretation of its political consequences and, therefore, speaks and votes against it. Or a scholar may dispute some interpretation of facts by referring to a perspective from which the interpretation of these facts appears open to debate.

When criticism does not stop before value judgments, neither values nor facts are immune to debate. In the human sciences, the topics studied are themselves inherently controversial.

Das Kennzeichen des sozial *politischen* Charakters eines Problems ist es ja geradezu, daß es *nicht* auf Grund bloß technischer Erwägungen aus feststehenden Zwecken heraus zu erledigen ist, daß um die regulativen Wertmaßstäbe selbst *gestritten* werden kann und *muß*, weil das Problem in die Region der allgemeinen *Kulturfragen* hineinragt. (Weber, 1904: 153)

The distinctive characteristic of a problem of social *policy* is precisely that it cannot be settled on the basis of purely technical considerations applied to given ends: [that] the regulatory value standards themselves can and must be the subject of *dispute*, because the problem projects into the region of general *cultural* questions. (Weber, 2012: 104)

The perspectivism of knowledge reaches a particular importance in the human sciences, where political and cultural questions – two concepts that Weber here uses almost synonymously – are at stake. In his views on “objectivity” and “value freedom”, he is making the point that disputes over value criteria cannot be conclusively “resolved”, although some of them can be taken off the agenda or tacitly lose their currency for debate, roughly analogous to parliamentary adjournments *sine die*. A majority decision in parliament or elections also marks only a temporary interruption in the debate, taken up at the next occasion or understood as a change in the agenda-setting that leaves more time and space for new topics to be put on the agenda.

Max Weber is among the few scholars who are willing to learn from parliaments and from the mode in which parliamentarians conduct their debates. He regards academic debates as regular and recurrent as those in the parliamentary-style of politics, in which debates were openly recognised already in his time. The historical model for dealing fairly with controversies, for being open and giving chances for new and one-sided views is for Weber, of course, the procedure of the Westminster parliament (see also Weber, 1908, 1917b, 1918 and the discussion in Palonen 2010).

Parliamentary disputes are institutionalised in the specific rules of procedure that not only permit, but even presuppose the presence of alternative perspectives. In the nineteenth century, the Canadian professor of rhetoric James De Mille formulated a definition of knowledge as predicated upon dissensus: “The aim of parliamentary debate is to investigate the subject from many points of view which are presented from two contrary sides. In no other way can a subject be so exhaustively considered” (De Mille, 1878: 473). In line with this idea is, for example, Quentin Skinner’s recommendation to his students for reading Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: “think of it as a speech in Parliament”, as a contribution to a debate (see Skinner 2008, cp. Palonen 2010 and 2017b, chapters 10 to 12).

Politicking with Facts

Now we can return to the problematic of “alternative facts”. The claim of *post-truth* politics could be perhaps interpreted as the view that academic as well as political disputes concern only opinions, and that the choice between them is arbitrary, as a “decisionistic” interruption of the debate by a sovereign dictator who is able to make the decision (see Schmitt 1921 and 1922). *Post-factual* politics refers then to the view that there is nothing beyond the facts, but that “alternative facts” might be offered, and the matter of which facts are chosen remains an arbitrary decision, because the facts are also just a matter of opinion.

Donald Trump may not know who Carl Schmitt was, although both Schmittians and Straussians played a major role among George W. Bush’s advisors (on Schmittians in relation to Trump, see e.g. Jurecic 2016, Mohamed 2016. I thank Anna Kronlund for these references). Trump’s practice of disregarding Congress, showing contempt for multilateral agreements and the frequently sacking ministers can, nonetheless, be seen in Schmittian terms as signs of a commissary dictatorship. The matter is slightly different with “alternative facts”, but they, too, cannot simply be declared *ex cathedra*, or remain unsubmitted to anything resembling a parliamentary, scholarly or journalistic debate.

Max Weber’s paradigm of “knowledge as power” was the “rule of officialdom” (*Beamtenherrschaft*) in the German Empire. As politicians’ claims about the world are regularly disputed and academic scholarship is recognised as always revisable, the officials thought of themselves as superior to politicians due to their knowledge of facts, their special access to sources and to official secrets (*Fachwissen, Dienstwissen, Geheimwissen* in Weber’s terms). Weber’s central demand called for the empowerment of parliament to control the knowledge-based power of officials by three rhetorical means, namely cross-examination, gaining access to official sources and being able to set up parliamentary examination commissions (Weber, 1918: 235–248, translation in Weber, 1994: 177–196; see the discussion in Palonen, 2010, ch. 8). Even if today parliamentary governments are more powerful than the old Reichstag, officialdom has also gained new powers, expertise and forms of specialism (for France, see Roussellier, 2015). All this has made Weber’s calls for parliamentary control of knowledge and for debating all claims about facts more important than ever.

My response to alternative facts would be to compare all judgements about facts with the way motions on a parliamentary agenda are handled, i.e. they are subjected to an open-ended debate. In this sense, it is trivial to speak of “alternative facts”. However, every politician who presents an “alternative fact” must regard it as a part of the debate between interpretations, and officials, for their part, can defend their views in parliamentary committees.

Post-truth politics can be rejected on the principle that it is not a legitimate procedure to terminate debate in the human sciences. A *post-factual* politics is equally implausible, because the opposing interpretations of facts are indispensable elements in political debate.

Debates on perspectives and facts can be combined with the key move of Westminster-style parliamentary politics, namely, the amendment. This is a move that at same time interrupts ongoing debate on an original motion, alters the terms of the agenda-setting, and opens up new debate on the strengths and weaknesses of the amendment compared to the original motion (see Palonen, 2014: 165–170). The claim that one has an alternative interpretation of the facts corresponds to an amendment to a motion in a parliamentary debate. It interrupts those debates that take the previous interpretation of the facts as given, alters the current agenda-setting by introducing a new perspective, from which the new claim may look plausible, and starts a new debate on the advantages or disadvantages of the previous interpretation and on the new claim about the facts.

The politics of Trump, Brexit, etc. should not be rejected in the name of facts, truth, science or any other allegedly supra-political criteria for judging human activities. Such politics can be condemned as unwise or as containing unwarranted claims or undesirable consequences. The discourse of Trump et al form an extreme example of a politics based on declarations and acclamations, as opposed to a politics submitted to thorough parliamentary-style procedure and debate.

The value of the Weberian perspective lies in its ability to challenge the conventional disjunction between politics and research. Unlike referenda and analogous moves, in parliamentary-style politics all decisions are preceded by debate and remain subject to revision. Research practices do have many similarities with the parliamentary-style politics of debate, however, in research the final moment of the binding vote is missing; as for the debate – in Weber's terms, the quest for truth – it is, in principle, unending. Indeed, scholarship as such can be regarded as a form of politics that is freer to speculate with thought experiments and is not obliged to make existential decisions that concern other persons' lives.

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