

The Meaning of Honour in Weber's Concept of the Nation*

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Abstract

A strong sense of honour and anxiety for the greatness of his nation were significant features of Max Weber's personality. Historic research about Max Weber has mainly focused on the nationalism of the politician while his theoretical concept of the nation as well as his sense of honour and his concern for the honour of the nations have remained out of sight. Starting from the complexity of the concept of honour in history, its shift from the honour of kings to the honour of the kingdoms and political bodies, and the relevance of honour for modern social and political life, this paper examines the usage of the German words for nation (*Volk*) and people (*Nation*) in Weber's time and in Weber's writings. After a few remarks about Weber's concept of the nation it leads up to the conclusion, that—for Weber and after Germany's catastrophic defeat in the Great War—the honour of the nation was the same thing as the nation-state's *raison d'état*.

Keywords: history of concepts, honour, social rank, social status, satisfaction, duels, kingdoms, nation, honour of the nation, *raison d'état*, Great War.

In spring 2003 the Google search-machine presented, as a result of an enquiry about the German terms for *honour* (= *Ehre*) and *Nation*, some quotations of Weber's famous lines from *Politics as a Vocation*: 'A nation will forgive damage to its interests, but not injury to its honour'; it is worth taking note of this quotation because it omits the end of Weber's sentence: 'and certainly not when this is done in a spirit of priggish self-righteousness'.¹ So far Weber's comment of January 1919 on the proceedings of the peace negotiations in Versailles. Who are the

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1. Max Weber, 'Politik als Beruf', in Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf. 1917/1919; Politik als Beruf. 1919* (ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter and Birgitt Morgenbrod; MWG I/17; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), p. 232; the English translation follows 'The Profession and Vocation of Politics', in Weber, *Political Writings* (ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 356.