



Paradigms for Political Action. A Draft for a Repertoire

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ABSTRACT

Whether politics is a separate sphere or an aspect of human action is a subject of academic controversy. I focus here on the political aspect of action, which is not exclusive of other aspects. There are no ‘naturally political’ issues nor is there anything completely devoid of a political aspect. I am now taking a step backwards to discuss the seemingly simple ‘political or not’ question, as compared to the ‘political in which sense’ question, which I have discussed elsewhere. In this article, I stay on the ideal–typical level, as I want to discuss alternative ways of marking the criteria for the political aspect, without discussing the views of other scholars in detail. I call the procedure for judging and naming this aspect political literacy, a way of making explicit the presence of the political aspect in some phenomena or questions. What is political at a certain time can, in other words, be judged as the result of a politicising reading of the phenomena in question. Here I shall construct a repertoire of certain ideal–typical criteria for marking the political aspects and making sense of actual disputes regarding the political. The repertoire includes the criteria of political action under such headings as expediency, partisanship, controversy and contingency. I regard the view of politics as belonging to a separate sphere as a zero option. All of the paradigms can be regarded as different facets of politics as a contingent activity.

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I. TYPICAL WAYS OF SPEAKING ABOUT POLITICAL ACTION

It is common to think that ‘politics is politics’ or to speak of ‘politics-as-usual’. Such a view presupposes an established, widespread, well-known understanding of politics, applicable across different times and political regimes. Against such an assumption, many activists since the 1960s have looked for a ‘new politics’, although with few convincing results. A footnote in Reinhart Koselleck’s *Kritik und Krise* (1959 [1973]: 170) has inspired several studies on the history of the concept of politics (see the Bielefeld studies of Steinmetz 2007; Meier, Papenheim & Steinmetz 2012; Steinmetz, Gilcher-Holter & Haupt 2013).

My own studies of conceptual history since the 1980s question the possibility of an unhistorical or standard view of politics and have instead, from the beginning, focused on understanding politics as an activity (Palonen 1985). Later, I realised that the activity concept of politics, though opposed to the sphere concept (for the conspicuous absence of debate between the two types of concepts, see Palonen 2007) can also contain a range of views. Some are rather conventional, in the sense that they are used in a seemingly harmless way, without problematising the concept and are therefore hard to identify. Others are connected to a limited number of *topoi* as the source of their profile (see Palonen 2006).

As a by-product of my recent monograph on the ways of speaking about political action in the debates of the German Bundestag (Palonen 2021), I identified – besides an astonishing diversity of views and nuances in the formulations and conceptualisations of politics – also certain conventions in the language of politics. I noticed, in the speech of Bundestag members, concrete references connected to the conventional views of politics. In discussing the adverbial use of *politisch* as accentuating or evaluating the political quality of action, I used such examples as *rein politisch* (purely or strictly political), *offenbar/offensichtlich politisch* (obviously/evidently political), *ausgesprochen politisch* (outspokenly political) as well as the superlative forms *höchst politisch* (highly political) and *äußerst politisch* (extremely political).

When considering such expressions, I noticed that the parliamentary speakers who used them hardly ever asked the question ‘Political in which sense?’, which was my own main interest in the book. The quoted adverbial uses took the sense of ‘political’ for granted, with the assumption that it was something well-known, self-evident and shared by the audience.

In a sense, this is understandable: emphasising the political aspect without spelling out what is meant by ‘political’ serves in parliamentary debate as a rhetorical move that may facilitate the acceptance of the speaker’s stand on an item on the agenda. When inspected more closely, however, such unproblematic views of conventional political action hint at the paradigms underlying it, at different ways emphasising the ‘political’ quality of an opponent’s action, without specifying the criteria for deeming it political.

The use of formulae to emphasise or make gradations in the political were most frequent in the early Bundestag, roughly corresponding to Konrad Adenauer’s chancellorship (1949–1963). During this period, politics as a concept was seldom problematised in the Bundestag, and the criteria for political action played no major role in the lives of the citizens of the Federal Republic. The absence of conceptual debates in the context of the adverbial uses of ‘political’ can be marked as occasions for distinguishing different paradigms of political action amongst the speakers.

II. PARADIGMS FOR THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF HUMAN ACTIONS

The impression that we already seem to ‘know’ what politics or political is due to the practice that the ways of speaking on the activity of politics are frequently intuitive. Politicians, journalists and even scholars try to start *in medias res* to say something about ‘the matter’ itself. Referring to something as political action, the actors seldom have a need to appeal to a dictionary, lexicon, textbook or a classic academic authority, unlike what they do with other concepts, say ‘the state’ or ‘representation’. They seem to possess an intuition that something is – or is not – politics or political. The intuitive view is frequently assumed to be enough for avoiding disagreements. Although on closer inspection, the intuitions of the audience may well be highly different or context-bound, an intuitive declaration is frequently sufficient to silence the audience.

To understand this, I have spoken of a low level of intertextuality in the attempt to conceptualise political action (Palonen 2006: 285–287). The interesting point in low intertextuality is that when these competing ways of qualifying action as political are not spelled out, users either do not notice their differences or tend to regard others’ views as wrong or mistaken, without recognising that there are different paradigms at stake in the debate. There is a scholarly interest in explicating the paradigms to get rid of the illusion of a common and well-known criterion for political action. Constructing a repertoire of paradigms for the political aspect of activity would be an illustrative step in transcending the reliance on intuition in talking about politics.

Beside the large diversity of ways in which individuals use the concept, we can speak of a few typical ways of distinguishing the political aspect of human actions from others. As a parliamentary scholar and conceptual historian, I shall discuss some ideal-typical candidates for the ordinary ways of talking about politics. I call them paradigms in the Wittgensteinian (1953) sense of model examples and shall provide a tentative repertoire of them.

With such a repertoire of paradigms, we could identify various, frequently opposed ways of distinguishing the political aspect of action as well as speculate on the conceptual changes that have occurred in the understanding of political action. The analysis of the paradigms would also help to eliminate the assumption of a single established concept of politics. The paradigms do not get at the heart of the question of the highly individual ways of using the concept (for Max Weber’s view, see Palonen 2019) but do serve as a tool for illuminating the middle level between them. Such an analysis would also be fruitful for interpreting debates or other situations in which contesting views are present or a certain view is presented as the only right one.

This article takes the form of a thought experiment for building a repertoire regarding the naming and the criteria for naming the paradigms and for constructing their mutual relationships. My discussion here is that of a Max Weber scholar building up ideal types (see Weber 1904 [1973]). The purpose of making the main paradigms explicit is to crystallise and simplify the conventional understandings of the political aspect of human action.

The drafting of the repertoire of twentieth-century West European paradigms is no mere academic project, but an effort to make sense of the conceptual debates over the presence of the political aspect in human activities. Eventually, this can be linked to an interpretation of the historical order in which the different criteria for political action have reached a paradigmatic status. Later, I am planning to apply

the repertoire of paradigms to an analysis of the vocabulary of politics used in parliamentary debates as well as amongst twentieth-century political thinkers.

Although my objective to discuss the answers to the ‘political or not’ question has a certain parallel with Schmitt (1932/1963 [1979]), in that we both would find the criteria for political action, but I am not aiming to demarcate ‘the political’ beyond politics (see Palonen 2007). For my purposes, it suffices to discuss the paradigmatic criteria for marking the political aspect of human actions, without any need to explicate what other aspects there might be or without longing for an ‘ontology’ (see Mouffe 2005) behind or below the action itself.

III. READING THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF ACTION

What do I mean by ‘political aspect’? In my politics typology, politics as an activity is divided into four main aspects: politicisation, polity, politicking and policy (Palonen 2003; for applications, see 2019 and 2021). Here I am, nonetheless, claiming that the distinguishing criterion of the political quality of action raises different types of questions than the typology.

The search for the political aspect refers to a situation in which something identifiable as ‘political’ is expected to be present. By recognising that practically every phenomenon related to human actions could have a political aspect, it is worth asking how to distinguish this aspect from others. As I already remarked, the political aspect of action is nothing ‘natural’: it can only be constructed with a political reading of the situation. The problem is, strictly speaking, to discuss what has been called or can be called political action.

A political reading is directed at making visible the distinctly political quality of the action, which adds something new to its understanding without a need to name other aspects that might be involved. When I speak of paradigms, I do not mean thought experiments referring to purely imaginable possibilities. On the contrary, a reading of the political aspect is related to existing readings, to what others in a definite context have said on the criteria for political action. Distinguishing and spelling out the political aspect requires a level of political literacy, including a historical knowledge of, and sensitivity for, what others have said (see Wiesner, Haapala & Palonen 2017). Of course, it is possible for a politician or scholar to call something ‘political’ that has never been recognised as political before, but such a move would also be related to existing uses. Inability to propose candidates for marking the political aspect in a context can be a sign of political illiteracy.

To claim that the political aspect is present in some action or situation is a rhetorical move, as is the opposite claim that there is ‘nothing political’ in an action or situation. Nonetheless, there exists a certain asymmetry: the claim that a political aspect is absent challenges critics to present counterexamples of how or in what sense a political aspect is present. Of course, it is still possible to dispute the issue, but such a move already leads to making visible opposing views on what constitutes political action. The claim of this study is that paradigms for political action offer a practical repertoire and useful typology that can be applied in practice of analysing texts and debates.

When politics is not in the ‘things themselves’, the phenomena or questions must be politicised by reading them as political. Political action exists only through politicisation, through a mode of interpretation that renders the political aspect both available and visible to the actors themselves (see Palonen 2003). Politicisation may be the intentional result of human actions, but it can also take place after the event,

as certain features of a realised action may be seen to manifest a political quality, even if the original agents/authors intended none. In German, there is the word *Verpolitisierung* for such cases.

To sum up, the political aspect of action does not exist prior to, and independently of, someone speaking of it, of naming or marking an action as political, making a claim of politicisation of the topic. Such naming can always be contested, but to make the naming convincing to others requires offering an illustrative presentation of *how* or *in what respect* the political aspect is present in the topic or situation. The interesting question concerns the variety and historicity of the markings of something as political. The paradigms that I shall discuss below are elementary forms of such naming or simple examples of ways of politicising an action.

IV. CONSTRUCTING A REPERTOIRE

My aim is thus to discuss the historically relevant criteria for the paradigmatic uses that distinguish the political aspect of human action. Accepting the plurality of criteria is the point, both conceptually and historically, which justifies a discussion of the paradigms. Recognition of the historical and plural criteria for the political aspect can help one get rid of the naturalistic illusion that what is political is determined by reality, as well as of the consensual illusion that, without shared concepts, it is impossible to talk with each other. Or perhaps more modestly, the point is not to render illegitimate any particular paradigm for political action, but to increase the readers' political literacy to the degree where they can identify and, if needed, make explicit the context and conventions for use in specific situations.

Consequently, I am not claiming that some paradigms are better than others; on the contrary, I share the classical rhetorical view that there are good grounds to keep an open view towards both sides. The constructed conceptual repertoire of paradigms claims to be sufficiently rigorous and to contain, as Weber's ideal types do, historical references indicating their initial momentum (on the concept of momentum, see [Pocock 1975](#), followed by others, including [Palonen 1998](#)). The repertoire also aims to delimit the paradigms' ranges of applicability. My repertoire intends, perhaps more than anything else, to be useful for analysing implicit disagreements over the criteria for political action in everyday uses as well as in parliamentary, academic or other debates.

There exist purposes and situations in which such a simple repertoire of the paradigms for political action not only illustrates the ways of using the criteria, but also the mutual ignorance, disinterest or competition amongst the users. Besides identifying and formulating the criteria, I am especially interested in discussing the conditions of competition or confrontation over the criteria.

When the paradigmatic criteria are connected to historical examples, their relationships offer, furthermore, the possibility to construct a minimalist conceptual history of them. The historical layers – in the sense of Koselleck (2000) – appear as thresholds that open onto a new horizon for conceptualising politics. The conceptual history could then include identification of momenta in which the thresholds are identified and in which they were activated. I leave the question open of whether the thresholds can be set in an analytical or in a historical sequence.

The comparison between the paradigms relates to their historicity as a highly complex matter and should not be confused with either ranking or striving for equal conditions for the users. The appeal of some of them has to do with their deep-rootedness in the

language, others with their frequency in contemporary speech, still others with their provocative novelty and so on.

Identifying paradigmatic conventions for political action could also be a way to dispense with speaking of politics, a wish which is sometimes heard. Linguistically, replacing the vocabulary of politics with paradigms for translation equivalents is conceivable. An aim would be to create a neutralising translation to get rid of the historical and rhetorical ‘ambiguity’ or ‘polysemy’ of the vocabulary of politics. In a debate between German constitutional lawyers in the late 1920s, Walter Jellinek regarded the word *politisch* as dangerous (*gefährlich*) and wished to replace it. This would avoid the problems of ‘political’ as defined by the previous speaker (Heinrich Triepel), who said the word was liable to ‘subjective, partisan evaluations’ (*Wertungen*) ([Veröffentlichungen der Vereinigung der Deutschen Staatsrechtslehrer 1929: 95–96](#)). No serious alternatives to replacing the word were presented.

Rhetorically, the vocabulary of politics forms a major part of the European intellectual heritage (see [Meier 1980](#); [Palonen 1985, 2006](#); [Rubinstein 1987](#); [Meier, Weinacht & Vollrath 1989](#); [Meier, Papenheim & Steinmetz 2012](#); [Steinmetz et al. 2013](#); [Claussen 2021](#)). From the late nineteenth century onwards, the emphasis on the political aspect of action has gained rhetorical strength in debates. The emphasis on the ‘political aspect’ of the question in a speech act is mainly concerned with its illocutionary point. We can always ask, à la Skinner (already in [1969](#)), what the users of ‘political action’ are doing with it.

From this point of view, the paradigms for political action are not purely formal conventions when they mark moves in debates. The focus on political aspects in contrast to the paradigm that affirms unproblematic aspects relates to a rhetoric in which the political point of view is still affirmed even when given a pejorative rendering. The paradigms are by no means an attempt to get rid of political action, but to qualify it by explicating the distinct criteria of the competing paradigms. Furthermore, the emphasis on political action focuses on the divide between the political versus the non-political and marks a claim for politicisation of the question. This is obvious when one side disputes that an action is political, but is then criticised as lacking political literacy, perhaps for the purpose of increasing the support for, or weakening the opposition against, one’s stand in the view of the audience.

An interesting case from the Bundestag illustrates the affirmative emphasis. Helmut Lippelt (Grüne) declared: ‘Wissenschaft ist politisch’ (1 June 1995). This is a provocative move against all those who have thought that politics and science (*Wissenschaft* including what in English is called the humanities) are separate spheres and who regard the mixing of the genres as detrimental to both. For Lippelt, failure to consider the presence of the political aspects in research practices and the organisation of science reveals naïveté. The question is not an either or matter. Lippelt acknowledges that the political aspect does not make the genres identical, but instead requires a closer discussion of their relationships. In fact, Lippelt modifies the provocation with an explanation following up on his initial claim: ‘Wissenschaft ist politisch: sie kann nicht mehr unpolitisch sein’ (*ibid.*). This is also not an empirical description of a change in science but rather a claim that the political aspects within science have become so evident that speaking of a strict separation between politics and science is no longer plausible. The attempt would again betray political illiteracy or, at the very least, lack persuasive power as a rhetorical move. It is obvious that here, *politisch* does not refer to the partisan paradigm but has a wider meaning, which I below shall call the controversy paradigm.

V. CANDIDATES FOR THE PARADIGM

Relying on my studies on the conceptual history of politics as an activity and my political imagination, I now present a tentative repertoire. I have arrived at the following preliminary list of criteria for paradigms that distinguish the different political aspects of action.

- 0 – belonging
- 1 – expedient
- 2 – partisan
- 3 – controversial
- 4 – contingent

Identifying a paradigm does not mean excluding the political agency of others. However, it is possible to understand the criterion of political action as an exclusive demarcation, where political action is assumed to ‘take place’ within a special space – a field, a sector, a sphere – or in the more abstract sense of Schmitt (1932/1963 [1979]), within a type of order or regime. The qualification then requires merely ‘belonging or not’ to the political sphere or political order, to an inclusion into it or to an exclusion from it. For political action, ‘belonging’ marks an absence or zero level: it does not concern the quality of action itself.

In the Bundestag debates, several speeches seem to refer to a sphere concept of politics, when demarcating politics from law, economy, etc. An important case was presented by the committee *rapporteur* Adolf Arndt (SPD) regarding a court decision on which persons participate in political life (*im politischen Leben*) and whose honour (*Ehre*) according to the court, would deserve special protection. Contrary to the court, Arndt holds it possible to define this circle of persons, which, unlike the ‘public sphere’, does not include artists and scholars, is neither identical with a parliamentary mandate or minister’s position, but contains high judges, party leaders and journalists and other writers (*Publizisten*) (18 February 1955), whose honour deserves to be specially protected. The sphere criterion thus leads to endless disputes on demarcating the borders, for which the quality of the action is irrelevant or at least secondary.

When every distinction requires a certain type of political literacy, this demarcating of the political order is in rhetorical terms metonymic. Action is political depending on the site where it is conducted, whether a geographical area, a building, an institution such as the cabinet, and so on. Moreover, even within spatial language, we could insist that for the understanding of political action, it is not just the location of the action that matters, but its opposition to ‘non-political’ or unpolitical action, corresponding to Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction or, in a wider sense, Reinhart Koselleck’s conceptual pairs, such as *innen vs. außen* or *oben vs. unten* (see the 1987 article in Koselleck 2000: 97–118).

Koselleck connects the conceptual pairs to what in Germany is called ‘philosophical anthropology’. Indeed, even without such philosophical packaging, the paradigms for qualifying the political aspect of action are more intelligible if they are presented as pairs of counter-concepts. The use of both would also be political, although only one would be distinctive for the political aspect of action. The repertoire could thus be presented as follows, understanding both sides in political and rhetorical terms.

- 0 – belonging – excluding
- 1 – expedient – normative
- 2 – partisan – independent
- 3 – controversial – customary
- 4 – contingent – permanent

Level 1 refers to the criteria for political judgement in terms of a tradition connecting political action to teleological judgement, to serving certain ends or purposes, as opposed to following normative principles, whether moral, legal or others. The teleological judgement alluded to in early modern languages with equating political action with clever, cunning or 'politic' action, with *raison d'état* and later with *Realpolitik*. For example, in Immanuel Kant's *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), political judgements remain of secondary value compared with moral ones, although we can also read Kant as presenting the two stylistic alternatives for political action. Nonetheless, the political point of view in judging action gains a certain kind of flexibility or opportunism through distancing itself from strict normative principles (see Weber's pair, *Verantwortungsethik* vs. *Gesinnungsethik*, 1919 [1994]). Balancing the merits and demerits of teleological and normative viewpoints relates to alternative ways of doing politics, not only in the foreign policy (see Meinecke in his *Die Idee der Staatsräson*, 1924 [1960]: 1) but also in situations of 'dirty hands' and discussion of when such actions might be legitimate (see Sartre 1948).

The situation appears to be asymmetric: to defend the political point of view tends to be more challenging than the opposite choice. Historically, even recognising a political sphere referred to something which was not moral, legal, economic, etc., to the naming a residual with diffuse borders (see Palonen 2006: 39–46, 55–59). All aspects of qualifying political action refer to a break in the order—not to disorder, but to using the occasion of the break as a momentum for action: political action is never completely 'in order', which might have been the reason why Schmitt in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932/1963 [1979]) looked for 'the political' as a type of order, instead of looking for political action as a disruptive moment.

Understanding political action as partisan marks a rupture with the ideals of justice as a blind goddess, with the principles of harmony or balance between the parts, or with a 'whole' or replacement of the whole with contesting parts or parties. The Peace of Westphalia created a regime of the great powers based on the joint opposition of all participants to any superior power. This can be seen as a classical example of tacitly recognising an elementary supranational polity level, upheld by partisan politics as well as the diplomacy of its participants (and complemented with the smaller states as additional powers, all wary of the possibility of the rise of a super-power).

In democratic and parliamentary politics, this paradigm corresponds to the acceptance of partisan struggles within states as a political moment against demands for unity. The partisan aspect can refer to 'ruling' party struggles with opposition parties, but also to other competition between parties for resources, with each party participating in the political game. The post-war Austrian *Proporz* system was perhaps the prototype of such an inter-party regime.

Identifying political with partisan has been a common view for a long time, in Germany already during the Bismarckian era (see Weidner 2012), and it was implicit in Koselleck's analytic concept of *Politisierung* (1972; see Palonen 2012). The identification indicates a regime of parties, excluding actors independent of parties and analogous to the old ecclesiastical principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*. This qualification of the political aspect is an affirmation of the parts against the whole as well as of the regime of parties over single-party rule. The historical moment of the institutionalisation of parties began with the *Parteienstaat* theory of the German constitutional lawyer Leibholz (1951 [1967]). It is visible in the dividing of speaking time in parliament on a partisan basis and the limitation of individual members' initiatives in the Bundestag. More generally, the new practice of state-funding of

parties was gaining ground in the 1960s on the condition that parties be officially registered with higher criteria than are used for ordinary associations. In Finland, parties not represented in the parliament (Eduskunta) have to collect 5000 confirmed signatures in order to enter the party register.

A referee who interprets and applies the rules of the inter-party regime must, however, maintain the possibility for independent action by non-party members and candidates as a limit that keeps party formation open and restricts the privileges of the established parties. This has been a problem regarding party monopolies in their running candidates in elections, versus maintaining at least minimal parliamentary rights for those parliamentarians who have left their party groups and act as independents.

The paradigm of controversial action and judgement moves the qualifying criterion of political action to a more abstract level. It also marks a break with the tacitly shared or assumed consensus, i.e. that which is taken for granted or not actually disputed; in short, with what is assumed to be customary in a context. Bagehot (1872 [1956]) used the expression 'break with the custom'. The point is that one cannot break all conventions at one time, but only with specific conventions. Skinner (1970) emphasised how difficult it is to identify what was customary and where a break might have occurred in the past. To identify a break requires a broader textual basis as well as political imagination and literacy, and the result might still be a guess.

The controversy criterion concerns the recognition of a polity, in which controversies are not only permitted to occur now and then but are constitutive of the polity itself. In other words, controversies are politically constitutive when they are not only regularly expected to happen, but when their regularity is built into the procedures and institutions of the polity. The parliamentary polity is the model example of this: in no other institution is debating *pro et contra* as well recognised and systematically applied as in the parliament, with the Westminster parliament being the best historical institution in terms of proceduralising and regularising controversy, debate and dissensus (see Palonen 2018).

The classical commentaries on Westminster procedural rules are the best illustration of how the conventions and precedents on dealing with controversies have been identified, recorded and debated. Unlike the continental tradition, in Westminster, the written rules play a rather secondary role. In their place, there is a long tradition of procedural commentaries, including the works of John Hatsell, Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Erskine May. May's work, first published in 1844 and repeatedly revised by himself until 1883, has been regularly updated since his death as part of the official procedure of the British parliament (see now <https://erskinemay.parliament.uk>). They are good examples of canonical texts that contain different possibilities for following the rules or altering them by reinterpretation. Sometimes the agent of change has been an event that has challenged a precedent or else canonised an interpretation. The controversy criterion for political action in a parliament operates with textual references that are used by all, but open to dispute (see also Evans ed. 2017).

For a controversial issue on the parliamentary agenda, the German word *Politikum* was frequently used in the early years of the federal republic (see Adolf Arndt, SPD, Ludwig Schneider, FDP and Wilhelm Hamacher, Zentrum, all on 31 March 1950). More generally, if the question was *kontrovers*, *umstritten*, *strittig* or *streitig*, it was not simply reducible to the confrontation between parties or between government and opposition but referred to an independent criterion for political action. Sport was not regarded as *politisch* in the partisan sense, as affirmed by Klaus-Jürgen Hoffie

(FPD, 30 January 1976), but this was contested by Hans-Joachim Brauer (Grüne, 4 June 1987). The political quality of sports became commonly recognised around the Beijing Olympics (see Holger Haibach, CDU, 5 June 2008) and the ice-hockey world championships in Belarus (See Dagmar Freitag, SPD, 10 May 2012). Both of these raised controversiality as a criterion for the political aspect in sports. The former gymnastics champion Eberhard Gienger, CDU, still defended the unpolitical character of sports by referring to the absence of a party paradigm (*ibid.*).

The qualification of political action in terms of contingency is based on the elementary idea that an action could always be otherwise. The source for politicisation of the action already exists. The action itself is never necessary, also the sense of *necessitas* in classical rhetoric might be questioned (see, for example, Peltonen 2013). Talking about the ‘necessary conditions’ or ‘political necessities’ of a given regime tends to hide political principles for which there is a desire to exclude. Such actions are not opposed to the contingent but rather attempt to minimise it. For an understanding of the contingent as a criterion for political action, the counter-concept is that what appears permanent or immutable. In a philosophical sense, contingent is frequently seen as a facticity, as something that just is, without any justification or purpose, as in Sartre’s *L’être et le néant* (1943 [1977]). Permanency, which for many is something valuable, is just such a limit figure and the proper counter-concept of contingency in a political sense.

The classical contingency of *fortuna* might allow certain ways of doing politics, although Pocock (1975) and Oakeshott (1975 [1991]), representing an action concept of politics, limit *fortuna* by *virtù* (see the discussion in Palonen 1998). The appeal to *fortuna* is a cautionary figure against perfectionist plans, which are in themselves doomed to failure due to the unintended and uncontrollable consequences of action (see the chapter on *Zufall* in Koselleck 1979). However, it is also possible to act in relation to the hazard, to respond to *fortuna* better than one’s adversaries (see Skinner 1981, 25–26 on Machiavelli’s advice concerning how to get *fortuna* to smile).

Max Weber’s concept of Chance relates to contingency, which is not a by-product of action, but a precondition for its intelligibility (see 1904, 149–150, see Palonen 1998). Recognising the presence of Chance in a situation opens alternative courses of action, politicises the interpretation of the situation, encourages politicking with the alternatives, and stretches the limits of the possible amongst the existing polity. This holds even for Chancen that are horrible or catastrophic: there are alternative ways for encountering them. Even if all are fatal, there will still be different political significances for different actors (see Merleau-Ponty 1947 [1980] on Bukharin in the Moscow trials in 1938). Like a football player, a politician might also look for Chance in situations in which there seems to be none and at least occasionally invent something new and original.

The concept of Chance in the singular and the plural is discussed in the Bundestag from different viewpoints, including missed chances, and preventing the Nazis from having a chance in the politics of the Federal republic (see Joachim Müller, Grüne, 27 February 1986). Chance can refer to a unique *kairos* situation or, in a rather Weberian sense, Chance to act otherwise in the parliamentary process, where the procedure is built not only on controversies, but on chances to look at issues from opposite points of view. All of these chances refer to political action.

Carlo Schmid (SPD), for example, spoke of the chances of a minister to increase his or her power shares: ‘kann es einem Minister nicht verwehrt werden, sich durch sein Verhalten Stützen für seine politischen Chancen zu verschaffen’ (25 October 1962).

Dorotee Willms (CDU) later emphasised the short-term availability of the chances for German unification: ‘Wir wissen heute noch besser als im vorigen Jahr, wie kurz die politisch-geschichtliche Chance war’ (17 October 1991, see also foreign Minister Walter Scheel, FDP, on a chance for Britain to join the EU after De Gaulle’s resignation from presidency, 20 October 1969). For Werner Schulz (Grüne) ‘Die Erweiterung der Europäischen Union nach Osten und Südosten ist eine politische Notwendigkeit und Chance’ (27 February 2002), which combine both a normative criterion and the possibility for something new.

VI. THE RANGE OF POLITICAL ACTION

Common to each paradigm is, at its origin, a momentum for politicisation that breaks with the status quo and opens something new, like Arendt’s (1960 [1981]) concept of *initium* or, with an emphasis on interruption, Hirschman’s (1970) concept of ‘voice’. Conceptually, every actual use of a political-action paradigm can be traced back to its politicising beginning. By repeating the action of politicking, the initial momentum might be lost and its political novelty and originality might fade away. For a paradigm, a certain level of regularisation and repetition is necessary if it claims to be an established or at least legitimate view. Each paradigm extends over an open range of applicability, from the original politicising momentum through regularisation to routinisation, by which point there is a tendency towards de-politicisation, or the fading away of a distinctive political quality from a definite context.

What is regarded as political action does not refer only to the politicising momentum but also the presence of the opposite side of the paradigm. The counterpart of politicising momentum is also present in the polity and always limiting contingency in one way or another (I use ‘polity’ here in the temporal sense of the action concept, as in Palonen 2003). When actors select amongst the alternatives politicised by an opening momentum, they have to situate themselves amid the political action that prevails within the existing polity. Perhaps we could formulate the point thus: qualification of the political aspect of an action is an ideal-typical attempt to bridge the politicising momentum with the regulating practices of the existing state of the polity.

I think this holds even on the zero level, in the sense that the attempt to expand the borderlines between the political and other types of order must remain more diffuse and subject to ‘borderline disputes’ (in the sense of Maier ed. 1987). We could even think of Schmitt’s formula, that the political is ‘kein eigenes Sachgebiet’ (1932/1963 [1979]: 38), as applicable to political action as a constant attempt to redraw the borders within the order conception of the political, seen as a zero level for interpreting political action.

The relationship between teleological and normative aspects concern especially the policy aspects of political action. The question is rather, how far is it possible and acceptable to include a teleological and normative point of view in the coordinated action called ‘policy’. Meinecke advocates in his *Idee der Staatsräson* a balance between them (1924 [1960]: 1), but the question must not be posed in such strictly linear and quantitative terms. It is equally possible to combine the two elements in different manners, for example, by justifying a proposed policy in purely normative terms but leaving possibilities for exceptions, such as the *ceteris paribus* clause. Here, we could identify the possibility of normative criteria transcending the status quo, while the Realpolitik style of sticking to what is seen as ‘surely possible’ is a routine view. The tension between the teleological and the normative dimensions can go in both directions.

In the case of partisan vs. independent, partisan action is a movement of change, whereas in a regime of parties, seeking to be independent may be foredoomed to failure and in effect support the status quo. Independence is, however, at the same time a condition of possibility for the parties in question either to take advantage of not abolishing other parties or, on the other hand, not preventing the rise of new parties. One-party governments have a regular temptation to gain advantages at the cost of their adversaries, but they can be reminded that existing parties should not enjoy extra privileges or that an open partisanship is better than a hidden one. The deadlock following electoral results and the inability to form a majority government might signal a risk of stagnation, against which the case of a majority government by one party, if it respects other parties and the possibility of being independent or beyond parties, would be better than stagnation in the status quo or a political stalemate.

The counterpart of the controversy paradigm I regard as custom, not as harmony nor, in its extreme form, as consensus. The politicising moment of opening a controversy must not be a singular event, for it contains the politicisation of the polity, recognising that dissensus between actors is a constitutive feature. This view is similar to what Skinner (1996) calls the rhetorical culture of the Renaissance, which involves a polity which assumes that for every move, an opposite move is equally legitimate, and for every argument, there might be plausible counterarguments. The parliamentary institutionalisation of the chances for dissensus is not merely a tool for opposing the priority of governmental motions; it is also the justification for the political initiatives of oppositions, backbenchers and individual members. In this sense, the controversy paradigm does not deal merely with motions on the agenda but extends to the politics of setting the agenda, including throwing ideas up for debate before they can be put into the form of an agenda item.

The contingency of Chance as a source for the momentum of politicisation consists of regarding each situation as something playable, also when nothing to play seems available. Political actors who operate with the contingency criterion are playing with their imagination, speculating through thought experiments and contesting what appears to be permanent in order that they may be able to act, to manoeuvre in the situation or out of it, without yet committing to a definite stand. Of course, there is no guarantee that the politicisation of a situation will succeed. In extreme cases, the permanent element of the situation resists identification. In a strict sense, permanence means nothing more than what has so far not been proved alterable. For example, US politics consists largely in attempts to identify the contingent, playable elements in the constitution, which is itself considered as unalterable, but which can and must be interpreted all the time, by amendments or by other means (see, for example, Kronlund 2022).

The contingency of Chance as a criterion has its point of departure in the assumption that there always are alternative ways of acting, even where some practices or institutions appear permanent. This includes the frustrating experience of a political constellation where all the different chances seem to lead to more or less the same results, resulting in a feeling of powerlessness to change the situation. Nonetheless, acting politically might consist of repeatedly making new attempts to identify chances which would, in fact, alter the situation, even if there is no guarantee that they will improve it. There are well-known examples of the power of the powerless, such as prison revolts which, though they might ultimately fail, demonstrate the presence of a Chance contingency as a resource for politicisation in extreme situations.

VII. CONTINGENCY AS A CONDITION OF POLITICAL ACTION

When politics is understood as a form of action and all action is contingent (in the minimal sense of the possibility of acting otherwise), we could say that in an elementary sense, contingency is involved in each of the paradigms discussed here. The facticity of contingency is common to all, but the paradigms differ regarding their view of the politicising moment of contingency.

We could try to specify further the different aspects of contingency by assigning names to the different types of distinguishing moments of political action.

- 0 – belonging – contingency of the residual
- 1 – expedient – contingency of purpose
- 2 – partisan – contingency of the plurality
- 3 – controversial – contingency of dissent
- 4 – contingent – contingency of playing

On the zero level, the point of political action consists of incomplete classifications of orders or spheres. Historically, ‘the political sphere’ seems to be the most incomplete amongst the spheres. Hence, action within the political sphere can be assumed to be less sphere-bound than others. The expediency paradigm contains the contingency of purpose, in the double sense of an attempt to transcend both the status quo and an incomplete achievement of any goals set for the action. Partisanship refers to the contingency of plurality in the sense that partisan actors have to consider their activity as one amongst competing parties. The controversy paradigm does the same on the level of alternative actions. The problem with it is that it is difficult to anticipate how dissent to a move will be manifested. The *Chance* contingency recognises that every element in a situation can be part of the play: in football, not only the ball and the players but also the pitch, playing with time, the rules and their interpretation by the referee, the series system, the conduct of the public, the players’ actions and the language off the pitch and so on.

In a quasi-logical sense, we could speak of a radicalisation scale of contingency from 0 to 4. This would be relevant for political actors, helping them to decide on their degree of willingness to accept a chance for politicisation and how to both use and limit contingency in politicking. In the historical world of combining this with different types of factual conditions and political constellations, I would rather avoid any hierarchical ranking of the contingencies, insisting instead on the singularity of each type, as otherwise different forms of political action, which are not simply measurable or comparable with each other, would be required for each type.

‘Political action’ has several paradigms in the language of today. Instead of reducing them further, my scheme insists on the significance of their separation and opposition. Instead of simply letting users claim their use of a concept is the correct or best one, I recommend that the elementary plurality of qualifications for political aspects be recognised. There are situations in the use of language where each use of a concept can serve to distinguish the political aspect from the (unnamed) non-political.

With the repertoire of the major paradigms for political action in Western Europe in the twentieth century, it is possible to transcend the question of whether an action is ‘political’ without asking the next level question of ‘political in which sense’. As answers to this question, the paradigms classify historically relevant alternatives and

serve as mediating instances for discussing more complex alternatives. Presenting the five (or four plus the ‘belonging’ or zero option) alternative ways of distinguishing the political aspect provide points of reference for the empirical analysis of the actual uses of the concept of political action.

The problem for actual users of the language lies in the willingness and ability to discern which alternatives apply to which occasions. Doing so also requires an elementary level of political literacy: getting rid of the aversion towards everything political, of the populist look for simplicity, and accepting plurality and complexity as a precondition for understanding politics as a human activity.

Of course, when several paradigms are competing for qualifying the political aspect of action, interpreting the situation requires contextual clarifications and specifications to be intelligible within the audience. Avoiding the ‘political in which sense’ question might become more difficult with the growing number of interpretations for what constitutes the political quality of the action. The paradigms then appears the first junctures for the discussion regarding their applicability to the question on the agenda, but the results might not be evident. An adversary might claim to identify more aspects in a formulation than what the original speaker had intended, and in parliamentary debates this seems to be a frequent situation.

The broader aim of this article has been to illustrate the possibilities to analyse political struggles and debates in contexts that involve competing paradigms for political action. Since the twentieth century, such contexts have had a regular part in controversies. My point is to emphasise that it is possible to make sense of these without trying to settle them à la finding a ‘winning’ paradigm and aiming instead to render explicit the different paradigms involved and judging their contributions to the intelligibility of the situation.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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