

# The modified issue: Turning around parliaments, politics as usual and how to extend issue-politics with a little help from Max Weber

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## Abstract

Ordinary political institutions such as parliaments remain under-explored in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and the conceptual resources for studying politics are far less developed than for science. But sites like parliaments are far more interesting than are their received images. This article argues that novel re-combinations of the issue-literature in STS and the works on parliament and objectivity by the German scholar Max Weber can provide us with analytical resources for grasping parliamentary politics with new lenses. In fact, reading Weber in light of the issue-literature provides for a better understanding of his work, and points towards how Weber's accounts are crucially about parliamentary politics as work – on and with issues and the matters at hand. In addition, Weber may improve STS's accounts of politics by his way of including the ordered and procedural side to issue-politics: Issue-politics is both about 'opening up' an issue as well as coming to decisions and take action. The article underlines this by discussing an often-misread part of Weber's work, namely his work on objectivity and points to how political procedure was a key inspiration to his understanding and developing of this notion.

## Keywords

issue-politics, Max Weber, objectivity, parliaments, politics

## Introduction: Moving issues to the inside of ordinary sites of politics

Scholars have recently drawn attention to the fact that although politics has long been an important concern for STS, there has been far less theoretical scrutiny and empirical attention devoted to political concepts and practices compared to their scientific

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counterparts (Brown, 2015; Marres and Lezaun, 2011). A key locus for the debate about the relation between STS and politics was established in this journal by an exchange between Marres (2007), Latour (2007) and de Vries (2007). Marres, Latour and de Vries agree that instead of submitting it to the same scrutiny as science, STS often takes its understanding of politics ‘off the shelf’, importing concepts established in political science and classical political theory. They argue that the enactment of politics beyond the sphere of traditional institutions is a basic condition to come to terms with, and that STS and allied fields have an important analytical contribution to make to its study. Extending the domain of what scholars study as ‘the political’, however, could easily lead to an empty formula of ‘everything is political’. Marres, Latour and de Vries argue that the understanding of politics needed a new principle of delimitation.

Marres’s solution stands out as a key contribution. According to Latour (2007), her re-reading of the debate between John Dewey (1927) and Walter Lippmann (1927) allowed for nothing less than a ‘Copernican revolution’:

[T]he key move is to make all definitions of politics turn *around* the issues instead of having the issues enter into a ready-made political sphere to be dealt with. First define how things turn the public into a problem, and only then try to render more precise what is political, which procedures should be put into place, how the various assemblies can reach closure, and so on. Such is the hard-headed *Dingpolitik* of STS as opposed to the human-centred *Realpolitik*. (pp. 814–815)

The general lessons that emerge from the exchange can be summarized as a call for STS to revise its political theory, to conduct empirical studies outside of the traditional political domain, and to investigate how issues delineate the political and mediate political participation. This reorientation has constituted a fruitful line of research (e.g. Marres, 2012). We argue, however, that in following the path laid out by Latour, which we detail below, there is a danger of overlooking key insights that STS could bring to the understanding of ordinary, day-to-day political practice, parallel to what it has already done for science. More pointedly: if we want to provide a different understanding of politics in its own right, can we really afford to disregard the workings of traditional sites of politics?

The eagerness to empirically follow the displacement of politics to new sites, and the search for politics anywhere except for traditional sites, has been motivated by an urgent need to move beyond existing political forms in order for democracy to be able to cope with new realities, such as climate change. Latour’s (2005) call for a *Dingpolitik*, or a parliament of things, explicitly makes the point that parliaments as we have understood them will no longer suffice. Marres (2005: 13) argues more cautiously that the notion of a democratic deficit after the displacement of politics should not be regarded as the failure to contain politics in a singular democratic arrangement, but rather the failure to connect the various sites of politics.

Latour’s (2007) proposal to re-describe the different meanings of ‘the political’ as different moments in the ‘life history’ or trajectory of issues brings out the problem of overlooking the practices of traditional political sites quite clearly. Instead of delineating a separate political sphere, Latour argues that five different meanings of ‘the political’ could be mapped onto five different stages of issues. In ‘political-1’, new non-human

entities bring with them new associations and modifications of the collective; describing this as political, in terms of cosmopolitics, was one of STS's most important contributions (Dányi and Spencer, 2020). 'Political-2' refers to the possibility of unanticipated consequences and entanglements of different actors, making the issue into a problem for a public generated by it; in other words, it is political in the sense pointed out by Dewey's and Lippmann's pragmatist takes on politics. 'Political-3' follows when the machinery of political institutions takes up the issue registered by a new public and tries to transform it into an articulated question in such classical terms as of the common good and general will, but fails. 'Political-4' occurs when the issue, which becomes the subject of public discussion in the 'normal tradition of deliberative democracy', is solved 'by one of the many procedures that have been invented to produce the consensus of rationally minded citizens' (Latour, 2007: 817). Finally, an issue can sink back into 'political-5', as a case for routine daily management and administration; in this apparently apolitical stage, the issue is not contested or questioned but it retains a lively pre-history and the potential to be re-opened and politicized in any of the previous modes.

Calling this unrealistic or over-simplified would miss the mark; it is rather an attempt at a streamlined re-description and should be discussed as such. In our view, however, linking the definition of 'the political' directly to that of 'issue' as played out outside ordinary political institutions is contingent upon a set of under-investigated assumptions. An 'issue', following Dewey and Lippmann, is initially characterized by its emergence *outside* of ordinary political institutions, a public sparked into being by the failure of existing institutions (Marres, 2005: 47–48). In other words, if we follow Latour's scheme, politics will only reach political institutions later in the process, trying to pick up and manage a problem the institutions had earlier failed to address.

Within this framing, most of what takes place day-to-day in traditional politics can only marginally be called 'political'; rather, the political begins with the exceptional. To be clear, our argument in this paper is not about distinguishing politics from the political, which is a separate debate in its own right (e.g. Barry, 2002; Brown, 2015). We are simply pointing out that making 'the political' hinge on this particular understanding of an 'issue' leaves us with a definition that almost guarantees that very little of interest will take place within ordinary institutions of politics. In other words, Latour offers an expansive understanding of 'the political', but one that marginalizes ordinary politics. The role of the formal political system becomes simply to register, handle and eventually tame the exceptional issue, its publics and its concerns. What was lively, open-ended and contested on the outside becomes bound by procedure and formalities, and eventually depoliticized, on the inside. This framing consequently fails to appreciate what the arrangements of political representation may enable and achieve. This can be related to how Latour at least implicitly seems to rely on an ideal of direct democracy, so that politics can be appreciated only in so far as it is approximating such an ideal (Brown, 2018).

No wonder, then, that traditional political institutions have not received the same level of attention as novel forms of politics (on parliaments, however, see Asdal, 2008b; Crewe, 2015; Dányi, 2012; Gardey, 2015, and contributions to this special issue). We argue that the key terms need modification so that well-known political sites and processes may be reintroduced as interesting objects of analysis while the novel insights of the issue-centred approach can be maintained. Drawing on recent work in which we

follow the historical trajectory of a particular issue in the Norwegian parliament (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016, 2019), we argue that the notion of ‘issue’ can be understood more broadly in a way that does not hinge on its emergence or primary unfolding outside of ordinary institutions. Conversely, the political work that takes place within such institutions includes the contestation and opening up of questions in far more inventive, interesting and complex ways than the simple managing or taming of issues.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the emergence and formation of issues (and publics) can be integral to political procedure as part of ordinary institutions.

A lot remains to be done when it comes to applying the analytical tools developed within STS to ordinary politics and to looking at conventional or traditional sites with new lenses (Asdal, 2008a, 2014). In addition, some old lenses may also prove very useful, in the same way that re-reading Dewey and Lippmann provided the key to allowing issues to take up their place as an ‘often forgotten protagonist’ of politics (Marres, 2005: 5). This is where we propose to turn to Weber and his writings on parliaments and objectivity, which provide important and different takes on issues. And conversely, the vocabulary of issues opens up for a more interesting reading of Weber’s work on politics.

### **Parliamentary politics as a particular form of procedural work on ‘issue-things’**

In the following, we argue that the work of the German scholar Max Weber provides us with new and helpful ways to approach the study of parliaments in both theory and practice. Importantly, reading Weber in light of the recent literature on issue-formation and laboratory studies allows for a modified version of Weber that improves our understanding of his work. Hence, the literature on issue-politics in STS may improve our understanding of Weber. But this also works the other way around: The turn to Weber allows for a re-interpretation of the very notion of ‘issue’ in the first place: in its ways of opening up for not only the *extra*-ordinary, but also the ordinary, and for its ways of making the procedural integral to the formation of issues. Hence re-reading Weber may modify our understanding and analyses of issue-politics as it has been pursued and understood in STS.

Hence, we argue that the fruitfulness of Weber’s work is particularly evident when read in light of the recent concern in STS with ‘issues’ and ‘issue formation’ (Marres, 2007). Connecting the vocabulary of issue formation to Weber’s discussions of politics in parliaments opens up a side of Weber that is often overlooked, namely how politics is a particular form of work intimately linked to the working up of the very ‘thing’ or issue at hand. Parliamentary work includes not only knowing the issue but also the ability to work on and *modify* issues. Hence the title of our paper: ‘The modified issue’. The title then, carries a double meaning. We will argue that Weber can alert us to another side of ‘issue politics’ in STS that is often overlooked, namely how procedure is indeed integral to issue-politics. As such, a concern with issue formation is just as relevant to politics *beyond* ordinary institutions (Asdal, 2008a; Asdal and Hobæk, 2016), as to the formation of issues as *part* of ordinary institutions. In other words, parliamentary work may modify issues.

However, importantly, Weber is interesting not only as a perceptive observer of political practice, but also as an inspiration for rethinking politics and its relation to science.

Rather than simply proposing clear divisions between science and politics, or facts and values, Weber's classic notion of 'objectivity' is informed and inspired by parliamentary politics, understood as an accomplishment made possible by procedural means. In the following analysis we build on recent re-interpretations of Weber's core texts, which we put into conversation with empirical material drawn from a comprehensive study of parliamentary practices at the turn of the twentieth century. In so doing, we make use of extensive printed parliamentary proceedings (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016, 2019).

Political science and history – often influenced by Weber – analyse and compare parliaments, whether as arenas for party politics, oratory or power struggles or in their functions as 'legislature' (e.g. Döring, 1995; Strøm et al., 2014). No doubt there is much to learn from this, but an issue-oriented approach to parliament has something different to offer our understanding of politics, as well as a different take on Weber. Often lost from sight in other studies are, on the one hand, the concrete and particular issues or cases being worked upon, and on the other, parliament in its site-specificity and material-semiotic complexity (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016; Dányi, 2012).

### **From talking to working, and the transformation of cases to issues**

Max Weber, at first glance, does not seem to be an ally of STS. Indeed, when mentioned in STS literature, Weber is often portrayed as a scholar concerned with strictly demarcating science and politics, upholding the value freedom of science, and narrowly defining politics as the struggle for control of state apparatuses. But a more generous reading of his immense work has much to offer (Palonen, 2016). For the concerns of the present article, we begin by extracting some key insights about politics from his writings on parliaments. Like Dewey and Lippmann, it is important to situate Weber's contributions in the historical context in which they were written. Weber wrote on German parliamentarism at the end of the First World War, when the very constitution of an incipient German democracy was highly contested. As a public intellectual, he published a series of newspaper articles that were later published as a pamphlet that has perhaps most often been read for its commentary on contemporary events (Weber, 1994a). Here, Weber makes a distinction between working and talking parliaments:

Only a *working*, as opposed to a merely talking parliament can be the soil in which not merely demagogic, but genuinely *political* qualities of leadership can grow and work their way up through a process of selection. (Weber, 1994a: 176–177)

'Work' is a key term. Weber's analysis of politics is firmly placed at the level of practice, as a form of activity rather than a sphere of its own, belonging to 'the political' (Brown, 2015; Palonen, 2006, 2007; see also, in this issue Brichzin, 2020; Laube et al., 2020). Political work is singled out as a particular competence that requires training and experience:

[Political training] can only be acquired through unremitting, strenuous work within a parliamentary career. ... Only this school of intensive work with the realities of administration

which a politician goes through in the committees of a powerful working parliament, and in which he has to prove his worth, turns such an assembly into a place for the selection of politicians who work objectively (as opposed to mere demagogues). (Weber, 1994a: 181–182)

In Weber's view, we must keenly observe the powers and tools at an assembly's disposal and how they are enacted through procedural arrangements – a rich field of investigation in its own right (Palonen, 2014). Indeed, politics and political work in parliament take place within and are ordered through elaborate procedural arrangements. Parliamentary procedure is key to the entire 'inner mechanism' of the political machinery of parliament, and any understanding of parliament must account for its procedures in depth. Earlier political thought paid close attention to procedure (e.g. Bentham, 1999), and there are crucial differences between national parliamentary traditions (e.g. Ihalainen et al., 2016; Roussellier, 2005). Differences in committees, in this case between the German and British parliaments, spur Weber's concern with the 'working parliament'.

Weber's analysis, which places politics at the level of practice, resonates well with established STS traditions (e.g. Barry, 2001, 2013a). However, returning briefly to Latour's description of the five-point trajectory or life history of an issue, one can get the impression that the issue unfolds independently of the infrastructure or material-semiotic set-up that enables it to move in the first place.

Rather than following Latour in this matter, we take our inspiration from early laboratory studies initiated by Latour and others and turn to an analysis of the classical political sites and institutions (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016). Laboratory studies have convincingly demonstrated how the devices that make up laboratories are integral to the procedures that make facts. Labs have been shown to be thoroughly ordered sites, as illustrated by Law's (1994) expression 'modes of ordering'. Approaches such as these show how labs are constituted by particular practices – or work – as well as inscription devices (Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Law, 1986). Reading Weber in light of laboratory studies may alert us to how, in addressing parliament, Weber highlights work and procedure in related ways. We argue that it is not possible to understand the course of 'issues' in parliament without similarly analysing parliament as an ordered site, with its particular procedures, devices and time frames. And in fact, as we would like to add, this should also apply when analysing issues outside ordinary institutions, as procedural ordering is a crucial aspect for empirical investigation more generally. In STS however, analyses of procedures remain far more developed for objects other than politics – in science, of course, but also in the legal system (Latour, 2010; Schank et al., 2010; Scheffer, 2007).

A general point about procedure in parliament speaks directly to our concerns in the present article: Parliamentary procedure prescribes a certain format for the questions under debate. Parliamentary procedure determines how an issue must take the form of a discrete item on the parliamentary agenda, in a definite form and at a definite stage, to be treated in a highly regulated manner. There is a 'parliamentary transformation of issues into items' (Palonen, 2014: 18). This would perhaps seem to go precisely in the direction that we have already called into question, namely treating 'issues' as things that are reduced and forced into a certain format to be 'managed' by standard political apparatuses. But this particular format, we argue, is far more open-ended and productive than these terms would lead us to believe at first glance. Indeed, Weber's notion of political work is crucially about the ability

to open up, investigate and question the ‘cases’ received from the bureaucracy, precisely at the time that they appear as ‘items’ on the parliamentary agenda.

Political work can engage with and modify the ‘cases’ or ‘items’ in question (Palonen, 2014). This is where we suggest connecting to the vocabulary of issue formation. The German terms *Sache* and *sachlich* point to an interesting dimension that is easily lost in the English translations. *Sache* refers to things, cases, or the matters in question, whereas *sachlich* in English versions of Weber’s work is translated in a number of different ways. In Weber’s text on parliament, it appears as ‘sober’, ‘objective’, or ‘technical’, but at the same time also as ‘factual’, ‘substantive’ or ‘of substance’ (Weber, 1994a). Weber repeatedly calls for *sachlich* political work or politicians with the double sense of being both rational and tied to the substantive matter at hand. For example, the quote above, ‘politicians who work objectively’ was originally *sachlich arbeitende Politiker*.

Opening up a case to different framings and challenging authoritative knowledge claims can be understood as a form of modification process. The crucial point is that this activity depends on a distinct form of political work that is found in parliamentary committees and that is intimately tied to the substantive matter at hand, which brings us to the heart of Weber’s motivation for intervening in the debate about German parliamentarism. Weber argued for a reformed German parliament on the model of Westminster, possessing tools that enabled it to control government and its bureaucracy. Only in this way, Weber argued, could it become a genuine working parliament. Parliamentary control would serve as a counterweight to the growing power of the bureaucracy, but the German parliament at the time had no means available to control official claims and their foundations. Instead, it ended up simply giving speeches, with little effect:

Whether a parliament is of high or low intellectual quality depends on whether great problems are not only discussed there, but conclusively decided there. In other words, it depends on whether anything happens in parliament and on how much depends on what happens there, or whether it is merely the reluctantly tolerated rubber-stamping machine for a ruling bureaucracy. (Weber, 1994a: 145)

For Weber (1994a: 178–179), it was ‘*politicians* who must provide a counterbalance to the rule of officialdom’, whereas the German parliament at the time was unable to obtain ‘the requisite knowledge’, and was thus ‘*condemned*, not just to amateurism, but also to *ignorance*’. By contrast, a working parliament, through its committees equipped with rights of inquiry, would be able to exert control over the workings of ‘officialdom’ and to make publicly visible ‘the *problems* with which officials have to wrestle’ (Weber, 1994a: 180). This was, furthermore, ‘the fundamental precondition of all further reforms aimed at enhancing the positive role of parliament as an organ of state’ (Weber, 1994a: 180). In other words, making problems visible, opening up cases for public scrutiny, asking questions and modifying the matter at hand were all integral to the political work on substantive issues in parliament. Weber’s concern is with the political work that goes into opening up and modifying the bureaucratic processing of cases – politicizing them and, in the pragmatist vocabulary, transforming them into issues.

With the help of Weber, we can re-describe the tension highlighted by Dewey and Lippmann of routinized but often failing political ‘handling’ of questions within traditional institutions and a ‘livelier’ public contestation on the outside. Crucial to our argument is

how Weber sees similar dynamics *inside* political institutions. His concern with the growing power of bureaucracy resonates clearly with Dewey's and Lippmann's debate over the conditions for democracy in the face of technocratic administration of complex affairs. Importantly, this provides us with a slightly different take on how traditional political institutions can be understood within STS. The issue-centric approach promises an alternative to the technocratic version of ordinary politics, which is a long-standing concern in the field of STS. However, Weber did not frame ordinary politics as technocratic, at least not ordinary politics as he appreciated it, and he certainly had no dreams of a factual, technical handling of politics. On the contrary, his understanding of politics implied the means of contesting the technocratic within the procedures of ordinary political work.

The above is one of the important lessons we can take from a re-reading of Weber: Key to parliamentary work is to turn cases into issues. Administrative cases can be worked upon, politicized and turned into an issue, enabled by the ways in which members of parliament individually and collectively engage with cases, equipped with standard parliamentary procedure (Thévenot, 2002). As we return to below, how this takes place in ordinary daily practice is a vital aspect to analyse far beyond Weber's concern with the tools for controlling bureaucracy. The important thing here is how issue formation can be understood as a process already built into standard procedures, rather than something that emerges when questions escape routine handling.

### **Political procedure as a model for Weber's notion of 'objectivity'**

As discussed above, Weber directly addresses parliament and its relation to bureaucracy. But there is another side to Weber that also provides a rich and nuanced understanding of political work, namely his 'objectivity thesis' (Weber, 2012a). Lessons drawn from this text often pertain to the distinction between facts and values, the question of value-freedom in scientific inquiry and the possibility of 'objective' social science (e.g. Bruun, 2007; Drysdale, 2007). Palonen (2016) opens up this work to a more radical reading. Interestingly for our analysis, Palonen argues that there is an important link between Weber's study of, and even admiration for, the working parliament and the methods politicians employ. One of Weber's major inspirations for his objectivity paper was his study of Westminster: Palonen argues that Weber modelled his understanding of objectivity in the social sciences and the regulation and organization of scientific controversies upon Westminster's working method. In doing so, Weber provides a different take on the movement of concepts between science and politics. Studying how scientific forms have been 'imported' into political discourse as part of a tendency to make democracy more scientific or rational has been an important topic in STS (see Marres, 2012: 15–19). Weber, on the other hand, sees 'objectivity' as an achievement made possible by procedural arrangements originating in politics.

Informed by Palonen's analysis, we re-read Weber to detail a better understanding of political work, with particular attention to a core point that is often overlooked or under-analysed, namely that political work is not only about rhetoric, strategy and opinions, but also about substantive knowledge. In this way, we can read the objectivity paper as though the topic of Weber's thesis is just as much about politics as it is about science. This is not as strange as it may sound. Even if Weber's paper is most often read to be



about the social sciences, social policy is in fact part of the title: ‘The “objectivity” of knowledge in social science and social policy’. Already quite early in the paper, Weber addresses the question of social policy explicitly:

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 subject of *dispute*, because the problem projects into the region of general cultural questions. (Weber, 2012a: 104)

This dispute, Weber points out, is not only about different class-interests, but also about different world views. Weber goes on to argue that:

[we have to realize] that the advance of empirical knowledge can never produce world views, and that consequently, the most lofty ideals, that move us most profoundly, will forever only be realized in a struggle against other ideals, ideals that are just as holy for others as ours are for us. (Weber, 2012a: 105)

Consider the above passages in light of Palonen’s (2016) argument that politics for Weber was not simply a practice but ‘also a perspective on thinking’ (p. 1). What Weber saw as the contingencies of politics and research were modelled on ‘the parliamentary principle that any question on the agenda can be fully understood only when it is judged from opposite perspectives’ (Palonen, 2016: 2). Only when judged from opposite perspectives, according to this understanding of Weber, can one have a real chance ‘to analyze a question from multiple angles and assess its strength and weaknesses’ (p. 2). This is precisely what parliament does with a motion on the agenda.

As pointed out above, Weber was no supporter of any ideal concerning ‘correct’ political decisions. Rather, he tied his arguments directly to a radical analysis of the limited nature of all knowledge claims involved. Hence, the possibility (or impossibility) of any conventional form of objectivity in social science was informed by a study of political procedures, which Weber highly admired. Palonen underscores that this is about an agnostic view of political struggle bound to procedural rules, ensuring the confrontation, balance and control of opposing knowledge claims. Or, more precisely, the very parliamentary procedure is that which elicits the formation of opposing views. Parliamentary procedures form an elaborate set-up, which – in our vocabulary – enables the production of issues or matters of concern and the reaching of binding decisions. This is what we want to underline: The set-up of parliamentary procedure can be seen in close parallel to (and is no less worthy of close attention than) the set-ups required to produce scientific facts. This requires, however, taking politics seriously as a distinct form of practice in our empirical studies, as Weber does (on this point, see also Barry, 2013b).

### **Becoming issue experts by working oneself into the material: A parliament of issues and ‘issue expertise’**

Weber’s contributions allow us to highlight what we argue is an under-appreciated aspect of ordinary politics. We propose to follow him even further into unfamiliar

terrain, and let this serve as an outline of an ‘ideal-typical’ construction of parliament, as defined by him as:

a one-sided *accentuation of one or a number of viewpoints* and through the synthesis of a great many diffuse and discrete *individual* phenomena .... In its conceptual purity, this mental image cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*. (Weber, 2012a: 125)

In other words, we will foreground a dimension of parliamentary work that speaks directly to STS’s present forays into the study of politics, without claiming that this represents the full essence of parliamentary practice, then or now.

Weber’s discussion, for instance, is intimately tied to the British parliamentary tradition and the ostensible ability to control government. Recognizing the significant varieties of parliamentary arrangements entails the need for specific studies, and, following Weber, ideal-typical constructions are a tool for this task.<sup>2</sup> We thus deliberately isolate particular aspects that resonate with the issue-centric approach. This adds to a more full understanding of parliaments in STS and related fields, including their material arrangements, rhythms and timeframes or theories of representation (e.g. Brown, 2018; Dányi, 2012; Gardey, 2005; Manow, 2010).

Weber’s concept of a working parliament finds strong resonance in our own historical studies of the Norwegian parliament, the Storting, where we have followed one particular issue around the turn of the twentieth century. By drawing on the historical texts of parliamentary proceedings, we can tease out what the ideal parliament should be. Debates over formalized parliamentary procedure provide a particularly rich point of entry in order to elaborate what political work is to mean. What we find is that a working parliament and the issue-working (*sachlich*) politician – are not only constructions formed by analysts but also historical visions advocated for by politicians (Asdal, 2008b). The importance accorded to these notions provide insight both into how the Storting worked and an ideal concerning the workings of democratic politics. For instance, one MP, while arguing against what he thought would be a simple deference to the authority of expertise, posited that:

Here in the National Assembly of Norway, we are used to – and I think, rightfully so – trying to familiarize ourselves with [*sætte oss ind i*] all things that are brought before us ... as best we can.<sup>3</sup>

This expresses an ideal that MPs should make an effort to handle whatever issue at hand – or, formulated in a way which is closer to the meaning of the original Norwegian way of putting it, to ‘immerse oneself in’ or ‘work oneself into’ the given matter, *any* matter. This is about something more than simply getting all the information pertaining to a case; the work itself is of great importance. A telling example of the weight accorded to this is how members of parliament expressed a protracted resistance against being assisted in their committee work. The Storting was constantly pressed for time, and MPs were complaining about being overburdened. A proposal to employ secretaries was a bid to improve the efficiency of this parliamentary work, but the measure raised vocal resistance. As member of parliament Alfred Eriksen put it during a debate over the formalized parliamentary procedures in 1908:

It would be no problem at all to get the working material [*arbeidsstoffet*] sent off quickly, were we only willing to move to a completely different basic principle [*grundsætning*] than the one the Storting has followed so far. Up until now, the rule has been that one has, precisely and diligently, worked one's way into [*sat sig ind i*] even the smallest cases, and this principle, is inextricably tied to self-rule itself, in the way this has been shaped [*udformet*] in our country.<sup>4</sup>

Along the same lines, another MP, Peder Rinde, argued:

We receive the cases or propositions [*sagerne*] from the government, bureaucratically prepared in an office [*i kontormæssig udarbejdet stand*], and then we are to treat them here, from a different point of view, from a more general point of view. If we are to have permanent secretaries, I'm afraid the treatment will become all too one-sided. As the conditions are now, at least the [committee member responsible for presenting the report; *ordfører*] is forced to work himself completely into the matter, without any kind of assistance.<sup>5</sup>

Rinde continued by saying that, as things stood, 'at the very least one member of parliament and the committee is forced to work himself to the bottom of the case [*gaa tilbunds i sagen*] and its documents [*bilag*]'.

From this discussion, we can discern precisely the ideal type of parliament. A set of points are worth noting. First, we can note a clear echo of Weber's famous distinction between the professional politician living *from* or *for* politics (Weber, 1994a: 190, 1994b: 318); several speakers note with pride the intense dedication required to do properly political – independent – work. Second, we can immediately recognize Weber's concerns with the opportunity to scrutinize the bureaucratic processing of cases; indeed, working independently on them is a pre-condition for politicians transforming them into political issues. Solid, thorough work has a control function, but there is also something more at stake here. Autonomy and independence from the perspective of bureaucratically prepared cases is enabled by engagement with the case material.

Weber's confrontation of opposing viewpoints can only fully take place on the condition that MPs have delved into and familiarized themselves with the material at hand. Doing so necessitates more work than merely getting the facts right. Weber argued that 'the position of power of all officials rests on *knowledge*', and more precisely on 'technical, specialist knowledge' ('*technischen*' *Fachwissen*) as well as 'official information' (*Dienstwissen*) to which the official has privileged access (Weber, 1994a: 178–179). Parliamentary independence depended on the possibility of breaking open an administration's monopoly on the point of view on the case as such. The MP Alfred Eriksen argued precisely along such lines in the debate over secretarial assistance:

How will it turn out if one is to have salaried assistants or aides? What kind of people will be hired? People with legal degrees, of course. And from where will one take them? From the ministries, of course. ... This way, these jurists, coming from the ministries, will bring along with them their ministerial spirit and their ministerial viewpoints, and bring them into parliament, so that the independent treatment [*bearbejdelse*] will suffer thereby. ... [T]hese people will remain for long periods, gain experience and become permanent, while members of parliament come and go. Some even suggest they should partake in committee meetings. I am terribly worried that such people, these jurists, these ministerial jurists, very soon will reveal themselves as masters, not as servants.<sup>6</sup>

In order to achieve control, the insight one gains from knowing one's cases to the bottom is decisive. The independent parliamentary treatment would suffer by having assistants with 'ministerial' viewpoints and legal degrees: the specifically political competence was acquired through working oneself into the material and knowing one's cases to the bottom – importantly, however, not simply knowing them 'as such', but from a general perspective.

The Norwegian committee system assigned each parliamentarian to one standing committee with a specific area of policy, with membership often extending for many years. This meant that expertise – or substantive knowledge – could develop in the parliamentary committees to the point where it could rival the ministries' own. Here, it is worth underlining again the need for *specific* analyses of procedure, as these debates are by no means a mere contemporary illustration of Weber's arguments. In fact, in some ways, the arrangement of committee work is counter to Weber's notion of a working parliament, where *non-specialized* MPs were crucial. Here we can note an interesting tension, much debated at the time and since: Would such a development of specialized fields of political knowledge undermine the concern for the more general point of view? Weber, furthermore, saw it as important to strengthen parliament's capacities by equipping each member with his own 'office and staff and with every means of information'. He also harshly dismissed a common criticism of 'rule by advocates', as in Eriksen's concerns above, which reflect an important tension around juridical competence in Norwegian politics of the time, through the dominance of legally trained civil servants and politicians (Asdal, 2008b; Weber, 1994a: 190, 217, 1994b: 330). Although Weber and the Norwegian MP Eriksen disagree when it comes to their specific recommendations, what they seek to achieve is very similar. They share a concern for parliament's independence and 'objective' (*sachlich*) work through procedural arrangements eliciting adversarial positions and opposing viewpoints.

The emphasis on the ability to work oneself into the material, knowing it to the bottom, and then add one's own judgment and competence is a procedure that might be tempting to compare to a form of science, or at least expertise. But the MPs of the time did not use this term and their own expressions are more adequate and interesting. In our material, the notion they often use is '*sakkyndighet*'. Directly translated this implies having competence on the concrete 'issue' in question (the Norwegian *sak* is equivalent to the German *Sache*, which can be translated into issue and *kyndig* meaning knowledgeable or competent) (Asdal, 2015). Hence, we suggest the notion 'issue experts' in English: Not experts *in general*, but experts on the precise issue at hand.

In an earlier debate over the organizations of committees, it was argued that good committee work required a 'thorough and *sakkyndig* [lit. 'issue-knowledgeable'] preparation of the relevant cases'. This notion of what we suggest to translate into 'issue expertise' is a form of knowledge that is tied to the material or issue at hand. This was contrasted with another concept, namely that of disciplinary expertise (*fagkyndighet* – or the *Fachwissen* Weber points to), which is the educated competence, for example the juridical competence.<sup>7</sup> In other words, this is something distinct from 'lay', 'expert' and 'bureaucratic' competence alike. Moreover, the notion of *sache* points to how this is not so much about *theoretical* knowledge, but rather knowledge about the 'thing' or the object on the agenda. Hence, this is *Dingpolitik* (Latour, 2005) – 'thing politics' – in a

quite literal sense. The issue experts in parliaments are experts on their things – their issues. Hence, this again points to how issues are not only that which is opened up for contestation. An issue is also the ‘thing’. Analysing issue politics then needs to take all these three dimensions into account and consideration: how and to what extent an issue is ‘broken open’ before reaching a closure and decision, the very procedural elements through which this happens, and how this is combined (or develops in tension) with acquiring knowledge of the very ‘thing’ or issue in question.

### *Issue modifications*

The above analysis and argument of bringing the issue approach to bear upon practices unfolding on the inside of traditional institutions is based upon a comprehensive study of the Norwegian parliament read through a protracted controversy over whaling, sometimes called the 30-years’ war in parliament at the turn of the twentieth century (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016; 2019).

The so-called ‘whale issue’ was a conflict over the consequences of modern whaling, begun off the northernmost Norwegian coast in the 1860s and ’70s. The whaling almost immediately met strong resistance from local fishing communities who regarded the great whales as important companion species crucial to the fisheries they depended on for their livelihood. The ensuing controversy lasted more than three decades, with repeated and increasingly complex debates and interventions by the Storting, before whaling was banned in Norwegian waters in 1904. Fisheries science and the scientific knowledge of whales at the time were in no small part initiated and defined through recurring debates over the whale issue in parliament. In several instances, parliamentary work ‘opened up’, redefined and expanded the issue by connecting the scientifically ‘closed’ question of whales and fisheries to wider publics, regions and new species.

In earlier and on-going work, we have developed a site-specific and issue-oriented approach to study this controversy inside parliament by analysing the printed parliamentary proceedings pertaining to this issue, as well as extensive debates over the procedures in use (Asdal and Hobæk, 2016; 2019). The issue or ‘case’ was a question of limiting whaling through legislation, but the parliamentary dynamic is *not* limited to legislation. In the MP Rinde’s words above, it rather pertains to ‘all things’ taken up for treatment, including budgetary or control functions. Parliaments are far too easily imagined as sites where propositions or questions are brought before an assembly, which then deliberates and decides on the matter. In practice, however, parliament’s procedural repertoire for different actions and interventions is indeed much more complex and inventive. It *creates* issue dynamics rather than simply responding to them. Similarly, parliament may be imagined as simply responding to, or being reflective of, a wider ‘public opinion’. Again, we find that parliament is rather *generative* of and integrated with public opinion; taking decisive steps that *form* new ‘publics’ and their ‘opinions’ – for instance by demanding public consultations, circulating proposals and reports, or commissioning investigations. In these processes, questions of legitimate representation of emerging groups, forms of contestation, degrees of affectedness and indeed the nature of the parliamentary setting itself are continuously at stake. Looking for publics to emerge only from the ‘bottom up’ or outside parliamentary dynamics and procedures runs the risk of missing this whole dynamic.

It thus makes perfect sense to refer to this as ‘issue politics’. Returning to Latour’s schema, we could say that new entities, formation of publics, articulation as a political question, public deliberation and routine handling all takes place less as a sequence than as repeatedly feeding into each other, with parliamentary work as a decisive mediation. Recurring parliamentary debates decisively alter the course and the framings of the issue, commission scientific investigations, and draws in other questions and new publics.

Modifying issues – turning ‘cases’ into ‘issues’ – is a crucial aspect of parliamentary work. This takes place from within tightly regulated procedural rules and in close exchange with government. Rather than viewing this parliamentary ‘format’ simply as a constraint or a distortion, we should look for what it enables, how it connects to and takes part in issue articulation well beyond parliament itself. As Marres (2015) has argued about issues in digital media, the different ‘formats’ of politics thus remain important to understand (on this point see also Dányi, 2019). The specifically political competence and the particular format or procedure of parliamentary work that both Weber and the Norwegian MPs point to can be analysed as the ability to open up and modify issues by engaging with and immersing oneself in the matter at hand. Again, integral to handling issues in this way is also the ability to act upon them, that is to vote and come to a decision – if not a conclusion.

The Norwegian MP Peder Rinde noted above how the cases are prepared from an office, from a bureaucracy, and how their form reflects this. This particular state – pertaining to the *office* – stands in contrast to what the political work of the MPs *adds* to the material. The word ‘material’ is worth underlining here – on numerous occasions, the members of parliament refer to the cases and documents they are presented with as the ‘work material’ [*arbeidsstoffet*] or even ‘raw material’, that is as a kind of matter that the politicians not only *add* something to but which they also work on and transform. Hence, they not only work their way *into* the matter, they also treat and alter it, and the material becomes something else as a result. It is no longer raw material, and nor is it office-prepared material. The work of parliament changes it into something else and different. Hence, the *sachliche* working politician is a person who works substantively on cases from a particular point of view, and by doing so simultaneously modifies and transforms them. This aspect of working is easily lost in familiar conceptualizations of parliament as an arena for power struggles, deliberation or oratory. The point here is not to sidestep that parliaments are sites for speeches and power struggles, but to foreground the often overlooked fact that parliament is also about a quite specific form of work. This dimension of work is perhaps what Weber had in mind when he famously wrote at the end his essay on the profession and vocation of politics:

Politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards, with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement. (Weber, 1994b: 369)

## **Issues always come with points of view: A procedural, substantive and appreciative approach to politics**

We have analysed the parliamentary way of working as a process of modification through which bureaucratic cases are modified into issues. As such, the cases become significant. The parallel between politics and the social sciences when it comes to methods includes

not only procedural elements concerning opposing views, but also the material upon which these opposing views build. In order to take Weber's position fully into account, we therefore need to make space for how knowledge claims and the material they build upon are integral to procedure. We must develop an eye for the combination, even the complete intertwining, of the procedural and the material or substantive.

When it comes to the objectivity question, Weber writes:

*There is no absolutely 'objective' scientific analysis 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, 2012a: 113)*

And in line with this: 'a serious attempt to obtain "presuppositionless" knowledge of reality would only yield a chaos of "existential judgements" concerning innumerable single perceptions' (Weber, 2012a: 117).

Weber's argument is precisely about the impossibility of reaching any significant knowledge without coming from or being accompanied by a point of view. In fact, it is only by emerging from a point of view that a material *can* become significant. He goes on to explicitly criticize the belief that knowledge can be derived 'from the material itself'. Such understanding, he adds, is simply 'owing to a naïve self-deception' (Weber, 2012a: 120). Weber argues that the *only* reason order can reign in the face of a chaos of facts is that

*in each case, it is only a part of individual reality that is of interest and has significance for us, because only that part has a relation to the cultural value ideas with which we approach reality. Consequently, only certain aspects of the, always infinitely manifold, individual phenomena – namely those that in our view possess general cultural significance – are worth knowing, and they alone are objects of causal explanation. (Weber, 2012a: 118)*

Weber (2012b) famously argued against political engagement or activism in science. This must be read, however, as having to do with politics as ideology and the academic persona acting as a demagogue. When it comes to the question of objectivity both in the social sciences and in social policy, we must read him as taking on a far more complex, sophisticated and, indeed, quite radical philosophical position. The task is not to *escape* from cultural values but to recognize that no knowledge claims of any interest can emerge *without* already being integrated with a point of view. It would be far too superficial to read him as if these values are something that can be put aside as scholars proceed with their research. Rather, Weber's position takes a profoundly appreciative view of both knowledge and politics: the politician is, ideally, a substantively working politician, one who actively works on his or her material and transforms them into issues. This dimension is lost, however, if we content ourselves with Weber's far better-known discussions of charismatic political leadership as a counterweight to the growing force of bureaucracy. Indeed, Weber (1994a: 181–182), in his most optimistic assessments, sees in the *working* parliament a counterweight against both bureaucracy *and* the possible ascent of political leaders through empty demagoguery.


Where does this leave us, when it comes to the study of parliaments? Expanding on the notion of 'issue' so that it does not hinge on emerging on the outside of traditional

institutions allows us to maintain the ‘objects’, ‘things’ or ‘cases’ that politics revolves around as our focal points in a new perspective on the old institutions. Conversely, by furthering a practice-oriented analysis of political work, along with the procedures and material set-up that prescribes a certain format and order to it, we achieve a richer understanding of issues and their ‘modes of moving’. Moreover, this modified issue opens for a more appreciative description of politics.

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### Notes

1. Although this inside/outside dichotomy is a simplification, traditional institutions remain on the margins of STS scholars’ attention. Marres (2012) has importantly reformulated this dimension through the public’s ‘problem of relevance’, in which different relations of affect-ness and participation, inside and outside, are in question and at stake in the articulation of an issue.
2. For a recent typology of parliamentary politics, see Palonen’s (2018) description of ‘legislative’, ‘deliberative’ and ‘representative’ assemblies. Political representation is clearly a vast topic of its own, in STS and elsewhere, but outside the scope of this article (see Brown, 2018).
3. Knudsen, *Negotiations of the Storting 1901–1902*, Stortingstidende 1901–1902, p. 765, authors’ translation.
4. Eriksen, *Negotiations of the Storting 1908*, Stortingstidende, 1908, p. 15.
5. Rinde, *Negotiations of the Storting 1908*, Stortingstidende, 1908, p. 44.
6. Eriksen, *Negotiations of the Storting 1908*, Stortingstidende, 1908, p. 47.
7. *Negotiations of the Storting 1890*, Dokumenter, 1908, ‘Dok. 1’, pp. 20–21.

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