Peaceful Strife: Dolf Sternberger's Concept of the Political Revisited

Timo Pankakoski

University of Helsinki, Finland

timo.pankakoski@helsinki.fi

Abstract

This article revisits Dolf Sternber

ger's 1960 theory, which, in explicit opposition to Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy thesis, found the essence of politics and the political in peace. The essay contextualizes Sternberger's propositions by relating them to his immediate post-1945 considerations – such as normalizing domestic politics, jettisoning authoritarianism, and laying the conceptual foundations for the nascent political science – and thereby reconstructs the questions his theory of the political sought to answer. The analysis shows in detail how the key elements of Sternberger's 1960 theory derived from the late-1940s: rather than reflecting an already normalized political situation or proposing naïve pacifism, Sternberger's text took political conflicts seriously and provided an outline of a desired but only prospective political peace amidst a crisis. Despite substantial polarity, Sternberger's view is largely compatible with Schmitt's theory once we remove context-induced polemics and grave misinterpretations – and carries potential for systematic political theorizing.

Keywords: Dolf Sternberger, the political, politics, postwar Germany, Carl Schmitt

1

1. Introduction

In Anglophone discussion, the German political scientist, journalist, and philosopher Dolf Sternberger (1907–1989) is primarily known for coining the term 'constitutional patriotism', which Jürgen Habermas later popularized. Sternberger also combined the affection toward the political community with the need to defend the constitution against those seeking to overturn democracy by democratic means, thus proposing a version of 'militant democracy' in post-WW2 Germany.[1] Further, Sternberger had a central role in the redemocratization of Germany and the establishment of novel political discourse, as some Anglophone scholars have noted [2], but his efforts in founding postwar German political science remain neglected. The most far-reaching part of Sternberger's work, however, was arguably his theorizing of the nature of politics and 'the political'. After WW2, Sternberger aimed at nothing less than a novel conceptualization of politics, and this endeavor culminated in a famous inaugural address in Heidelberg in 1960. Published on print the next year, *Der Begriff des Politischen* sought to transcend Carl Schmitt's classical account of the same name in fundamentally altered surroundings.[3] Although Sternberger's theory has occasionally been noted in Anglophone scholarship[4], it remains neglected in the wider theoretical

[1] Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 21-6.

[2] Udi Greenberg, *The Weimar Century German Émigrés and the Ideological Foundations of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 70-1.

[3] Dolf Sternberger, 'Der Begriff des Politischen', [1960], in *Schriften IV*: *Staatsfreundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1980), 293-320; Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002[1927/1932]).

[4] Peter M. R. Stirk, *Twentieth-Century German Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 141; Jan Müller, 'Preparing for the Political: German Intellectuals Confront the "Berlin

debate on 'the political'.[5] Also Sternberger's 1978 *magnum opus* on the three roots of politics in Aristotelian community, Machiavellian power politics, and Augustinian eschatology, respectively, reasserted similar points with a historical focus, but the volume has received little attention outside Germany.[6]

Particularly the 1960 text merits our critical attention – for two main reasons. First, and more systematically, Sternberger's essay sketched an original theory of the political, which took political conflicts seriously without, however, essentializing them or losing sight of human communality and sociability. Sternberger offered an 'associative' theory of the political, which also incorporated 'dissociative' elements[7], thus going beyond such absolute dichotomies. Sternberger's theory also primarily addressed domestic politics, and it may provide contemporary political theorizing with building blocks more directly applicable than those derived from Schmitt's thought. In reasserting the conflictual dimension of allegedly depoliticized liberal politics, contemporary advocates of agonistic democracy, conscious of the irony, turn to Schmitt[8], although this committed antiliberal-cum-antipluralist provided no positive theory of political conflicts within societies, but more or less only stretched his 'realistic' view of international relations into an allegedly universal theory of the

Republic"', in *Political Thought and German Unification: the New German Ideology?,* ed. Howard Williams, Colin Wight, and Norbert Kapferer (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 210.

[5] James Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Oliver Marchart, *Die Politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016).

[6] Dolf Sternberger, *Drei Wurzeln der Politik*, Schriften II:1-2 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1978).

[7] Marchart, *Politische Differenz*, 35-42.

[8] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 4-5, 14.

political per se. Sternberger's view of the political as peace-oriented reconciliation of political quarrels in domestic-parliamentary and international settings alike, by contrast, is not mentioned in these debates – presumably because contemporary theorists are not acquainted with Sternberger's ideas, question his civic orientation, or miscategorize him, upon literal-textual reading, as a straightforward proponent of pacifism. However, if Schmitt's categories can be utilized for immanent criticism of liberal politics despite their ideological commitments, the same, logically, goes for Sternberger. His alternative theory of the political is worth revisiting even if one does not share its underlying normative commitments or institutional ramifications or has misgivings about his occasionally oversimplifying formulations.

Second, Sternberger's theory of the political is worth closer analysis not despite its context-bound nature and consequent limitations but precisely therefore. On account of being intertwined with topical concerns, the text transmits what was at stake for its author and German political thought of the era more broadly. The 1960 essay highlights how the various notions of the political are contextual formations arising from the concrete challenges and debates of their day. I contextualize Sternberger's text in order to increase our understanding of the essay itself and the wider theoretical moves and intentions behind it, but also the limitations and relative shortcomings in Sternberger's endeavor, thereby aiming to separate the still useful elements from the rest.

The core theoretical import of Sternberger's essay is crystallized in the following passage:

The subject matter and aim of politics is peace. We have to, and wish to, seek to comprehend the political as the domain of endeavors to establish peace, to preserve peace, to guarantee, to protect and certainly also to defend peace. Or, to put it otherwise: peace is the political category per se. Or, expressed yet differently: peace is the ground and characteristic, and the norm of the political, all this at once.[9]

Because Sternberger's essay utilized phraseology popularized by Schmitt already in the 1920s, it has been read as a reaction against Schmitt – justly, no doubt, in terms of both substance and rhetoric. While Schmitt characterized the political with reference to the distinction between friend and enemy and linked the political conceptually with the possibility of physically destroying the enemy in war, Sternberger rather associated it with peace. The polemical intent is evident, but Sternberger's reasons for proceeding by reversing Schmitt's categories mechanically are less evident. Consequently, Sternberger's aims and the 'point' – to use Skinnerian vocabulary – of his text are easy to miscomprehend if one only reads the sentences therein. The present essay therefore engages in some intellectual contextualization and, on that basis, clarifies the meaning and significance of Sternberger's occasionally enigmatic formulations.

Despite its intellectual and rhetorical rigidity, Sternberger's 1960 text is a fascinating condensation of his wider intellectual project in the immediate postwar context. The reconceptualization of the political derives decisively from his essays since the mid-1940s and should be read in this light rather than as a mere one-off polemic with

---

[9] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 304-5. All translations are by the author.

Schmitt. Reinhard Mehring underscored how Sternberger later reworked his ideas into a full-scale theory of civic politics in the constitutional state so that the 1960 text served as a 'program and prelude' for his subsequent work.[10] This, however, misconstrues its genesis and incorrectly emphasizes the abruptness of the inaugural address. Rather than emerging as abstract statements and overstatements, the key propositions in the text were anticipated in Sternberger essayistic and journalistic analyses immediately after the war as well as in his various commentaries in questions of elections, voting, and parliamentary democracy in the 1950s.[11]

In the next section, I consider several contextual cues in the text and link them with Sternberger's immediate postwar considerations, thereby reconstructing the questions to which his theory of the political was an answer. The section after that engages analytically with Sternberger's argumentation since 1945 and shows how the various pieces of the 1960 essay were elaborated in earlier texts. The last substance section analyzes the Sternberger/Schmitt opposition and restates the relevance of Sternberger's reconceptualization for systematic political theory.

---

[10] Reinhard Mehring, 'Bürgerliche statt demokratische Legitimität: Dolf Sternbergers Auseinandersetzung um den Begriff des Politischen', in *Metamorphosen des Politischen: Grundfragen politischer Einheitsbildung seit den 20er Jahren,* ed. Andreas Göbel, Dirk van Laak and Ingeborg Villinger (Berlin: Akademie, 1995), 236, 245.

[11] My reading here parallels that in Claudia Kinkela, *Die Rehabilitierung des Bürgerlichen im Werk Dolf Sternbergers* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001), especially 221. Also Friedrich Kießling (*Die undeutschen Deutschen: Eine ideengeschichtliche Archäologie der alten Bundesrepublik 1945–1972* [Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2012], 296) emphasizes the continuities in Sternberger's work, noting that 'the intellectual pathos of the postwar era' still reverberated in his 1978 magnum opus.

2. Contextualizing Sternberger's moves

Before joining the academy, Sternberger worked as a political journalist and public intellectual. In this capacity, he delivered popular radio broadcasts, commenting upon contemporary questions but also reflecting upon what politics, in its essence, was. These reflections, published as *Dreizehn politische Radio-Reden 1946* ('Thirteen Political Radio Speeches 1946', 1947) significantly anticipate the 1960 essay – both in terms of its substantial propositions and its potent style. Many formulations from the radio broadcasts also migrated to Sternberger's academic articles, turning his postwar *oeuvre* into a mixture of nearly technical analysis of electoral systems à la Anglophone political science and essayistic, even epigrammatic prose with occasional undertones from Jaspersian *Existenzphilosophie*. Particularly in 'Macht und Sitte' ('Power and Mores', 1948), Sternberger sketched a concept of politics along the lines of the radio broadcasts, calling for a comprehensive notion to tie together numerous aspects of the emerging political science. His primary research interests in the 1950s were parliamentary politics, elections, political parties, government formation, and the role of the opposition, and the 1950s essays offer crucial steps toward the 1960 account.

There are five aspects of the wider context of Sternberger's theory of the political that particularly merit attention before analyzing his arguments in detail. First, Sternberger's search for the political was intimately linked with establishing political science as an independent field of study and systematizing its key concepts. Sternberger is often mentioned as one of the founding fathers of German postwar

political science alongside Ernst Fraenkel, Arnold Bergstraesser, Wilhelm Hennis, and others.[12] Novel concepts of politics and the political were needed so that the emerging discipline would have a shared object of study and a consistent identity. As Sternberger noted in the very first sentence of his essay, it was the task of political science to seek to 'comprehend the political' and to come up with a 'concept of the political', although this was a mission never to be fully accomplished, and its accomplishment would actually spell the end of the field.[13] Sternberger had engaged with this extensive notion of the political already in 'Macht und Sitte' wherein he – for the first time – utilized the vocabulary of 'the political' rather than 'politics', asked whether there were specifically political phenomena distinct from juridical, economic, social, and moral phenomena, underscored the need for a 'theory of the specifically political' (*Theorie des eigentümlich Politischen*).[14]

The search for the autonomous 'political' was launched in language exteriorly similar to, and compatible with, Schmitt's call for a criterion of the political as distinct from economy, ethics, esthetics, and related fields.[15] Sternberger was by no means alone in putting the question in this way, yet jettisoning the Schmittian answers – in fact, this was a standard maneuver in postwar political science. For instance the Hamburg-based political scientist Siegfried Landshut lamented the 'great and general

---

[12] Wilhelm Bleek, *Geschichte der Politikwissenschaft in Deutschland* (Munich: Beck, 2001), 294-5

[13] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 295.

[14] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte: Eine Studie über Politik als Wissenschaft', [1948], in *Lebende Verfassung: Studien über Koalition und Opposition* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1956), 13.

[15] Schmitt, *Begriff*, 26-7.

uncertainty regarding the actual content of [the] concept [of the political]'.[16] After a reference to Schmitt's concept of the political, Wilhelm Hennis described political science as still being amidst a search for its proper subject and spelled out the need in contemporary state theory to engage with 'the problem of the political' and 'the concept of the political'.[17] To ask for the nature of the political, was therefore a matter of systematizing the conceptual apparatus in political science and consolidating, and partly redrawing, disciplinary boundaries in the social and human sciences. When Sternberger identified peace as the domain of the political in his 1960 essay, he did not write merely as a political philosopher and essayist, but also as a well-established political scientist, institutionally authorized to develop the conceptual categories guiding his profession.

This aspect is intertwined with the *second* contextual aspect, namely Sternberger's explicit attempt to provide a new, philosophically sound and normatively acceptable concept of the political to serve the project of rebuilding Germany as a democratic polity. This necessitated shedding away the burden of the earlier German tradition of political thought in which politics had been conceptualized mostly as struggle for power, as the affairs of a strong state, and with respect to the assumption that warfare manifested the essence of the state in its purest form. Post-1945 political scientists not only faced an academic mission, but also the task of providing theoretical foundations

[16] Siegfried Landshut, 'Empirische Forschung und Grundlagenforschung in der Politischen Wissenschaft', [1956], in *Kritik der Soziologie und andere Schriften zur Politik* (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1969), 307.

[17] Wilhelm Hennis, 'Politik und praktische Philosophie: Eine Studie zur Rekonstruktion der politischen Wissenschaft', [1959], in *Politikwissenschaft und politisches Denken: Politikwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen II* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 2, 73.

for a democratic and parliamentary order after the complete shipwreck of authoritarianism. Correspondingly, the discipline had the self-identity of 'a science of democracy', seeking to supervise Germany's redemocratization.[18] The endeavor to establish political science as an independent field was substantially supported by the Anglo-American occupiers who also promoted political democratization.[19]

Sternberger emphatically advocated a pluralistic, liberal, and civic political order based on parliamentary representation, open societal debate, free opinion-formation, and regular elections as expressions of the political will of the people rather than as mere legitimizing plebiscites. In his attempted breakaway from the authoritarian traditions, Sternberger criticized the well-known theories of Clausewitz, Treitschke, Bismarck, Weber, Schmitt, and others. Many contemporary thinkers similarly recognized the need to shed the authoritarian past. For instance Jaspers explicitly noted that the emerging postwar state necessitated 'a new political mode of thought',[20] which could not be 'the continuation of Prussian political thinking or the continuation of thinking in the categories of the nation state'.[21] Also Sternberger forcefully challenged the inherited conceptual apparatus, which he and his fellow reformers saw as having contributed to the impasse of German political analysis as exercised in traditional *Staatsrechtslehre* or by the nationalistically oriented historians

---

[18] Helmut Dubiel, 'The Acceptance of Democracy: Intellectual and Political Culture in West Germany', in *Coping With the Past: Germany and Austria after 1945,* ed. Kathy Harms, Lutz R. Reuter, and Volker Dürr (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 134.

[19] Greenberg, *Weimar Century.*

[20] Karl Jaspers, *Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung: Über Aufgaben deutscher Politik* (Munich: Piper, 1960), 120.

[21] Ibid., 122.

of the previous generation. To avoid the downfall of democracy, like that in Weimar, it was paramount to make the 'highest, simpliest, and most elemental political concepts as clear as possible' so that they would be 'familiar to everyone'.[22] Clarity also implied occasional normative reconsideration, particularly that regarding the basic concept of politics. There were so many 'imbecile' and 'malicious' views of politics around, Sternberger noted in 1946, that it was small wonder that politics had turned 'murderous'.[23]

The postwar scholars' need to ditch the former tradition of political thought guided the way Sternberger started asking for the concept of the political – and partially prestructured his answers, as is particularly the case with Sternberg's reading of Schmitt. The third contextual aspect is therefore that of general anti-Schmittian impulses in German postwar political science. The polemic against Schmitt in particular caused Sternberger to formulate his position more categorically than he presumably would have done otherwise; this, however, was generational phenomenon rather than merely a single unsuccessful debate between two political thinkers. Many of Sternberger's contemporary colleagues took Schmitt as their primary target. Arnold Bergstraesser rejected as too simplified the view that politics originated in 'the opposition of friend and enemy' or that the political would merely reflect 'the degree of intensity of the alliance or distinction between human beings'.[24] Landshut similarly rebutted Schmitt's theory as a substantially empty, if not circular, attempt to define

---

[22] Dolf Sternberger, *Dreizehn politische Radio-Reden 1946* (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1947), 24.

[23] Ibid., 49.

[24] Arnold Bergstraesser, 'Politik', [1956], in *Weltpolitik als Wissenschaft: Geschichtliches Bewußtsein und politische Entscheidung* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1965), 186-7.

the political community with respect to an existential enemy without specifying what would make those within the community existential friends.[25] With explicit reference to Schmitt, the fellow Heidelbergian Carl J. Friedrich denied that politics was 'entirely or even primarily strife and struggle' or 'only a matter of identifying the enemy'.[26] Like Sternberger, his former teacher Karl Jaspers called for a new kind of politics, lamenting that 'old politics' considered everything from the viewpoint of 'friend and enemy' and 'with respect to war', whereas Jaspers's 'new politics' would be looking for 'peace and its presuppositions' in the reality of the friend/enemy distinction.[27] Sternberger's reaction against the Schmittian conceptualization of the political, thus, was a part of the postwar thinkers' opposition to a perceived symbolic figurehead of prewar authoritarianism, nationalism, and radical conservatism. The very act of offering, at least seemingly, a superior theory to counter the Schmittian political was a symbolic gesture and a way of earning one's spurs in the republican sectors of the German postwar academia.

Fourth, to further contextualize Sternberger's essay, we must note that it was first delivered as an inaugural address in the great hall of the university of Heidelberg in November 1960. Postwar Heidelberg itself was a symbol of the new beginning of intellectual and political life under American rule, highlighting the profundity of the process of liberalization and cultural change, going significantly beyond mere denafizication, yet also reflecting the challenges therein. The turn toward a more

---

[25] Landshut, 'Empirische Forschung', 315.

[26] Carl J. Friedrich, *Man and His Government: An Empirical Theory of Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 412.

[27] Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit* (Munich: Piper, 1960[1958]), 481-2.

liberal outlook took place upon an intellectual ground with numerous deep-lying strata. On the one hand, Heidelberg was one of the places where Schmitt's spirit was still 'clearly alive'[28] at the time, and thereby also the 'center of the scientific dispute with Schmitt'.[29] Not only the legal scholar Ernst Forsthoff taught there, but also several intellectual Schmittians of the next generation, such as Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Reinhart Koselleck, Nicolaus Sombart, Roman Schnur, and Hanno Kesting, studied and worked in Heidelberg. On the other hand, however, Heidelberg was known for its liberal and West-oriented athmosphere upheld by Karl Jaspers, Alfred Weber, Karl Löwith, Carl J. Friedrich, and others. Sternberger, together with Hannah Arendt, had studied under Jaspers. Both younger scholars were forcefully influenced by Jaspers's philosophy of existence, but also Arendt's early work, partly published in *Die Wandlung,* which Sternberger co-edited with Jaspers and others, stimulated Sternberger's Neo-Aristotelian ideas. Heidelberg was the place where both the Jaspersian and the (anti-)Schmittian tones of Sternberger's essay were the most likely to find resonance – or at least an audience capable of detecting these undertones. In fact, the essay can be interpreted as an intricate implicit encounter between the partly rival, partly co-extensive Schmittian and Jaspersian political languages, as I will elaborate later.

Fifth, the 1960 text reflects the wider postwar attempt to switch from crisis politics to normal politics. The process of concrete normalization implied a shift of mentality

---

[28] Bernhard Vogel, 'Dolf Sternberger und die politische Wissenschaft', in *Politikwissenschaft in Heidelber: 50 Jahre Institute für Politische Wissenschaft*, ed. Arno Mohr and Dieter Nohlen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), 242.

[29] Dirk van Laak, *Gespräche in der Sicherheit des Schweigens: Carl Schmitt in der politischen Geistesgeschichte der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), 187.

and perspective from the exception, the extreme case, and what in a worst-case scenario could be, toward the normal state and the actually existing, toward that which should and could be, and toward how the possible and the preferable could be institutionalized in the young *Bundesrepublik*. In constitutional law, Rudolf Smend explicitly challenged the Schmittian orientation towards the borderline case.[30] The Schmittian and Smendian schools came to dominate constitutional law in the early Federal Republic – the former school primarily concerned, in Günter's formulation, with 'the polemical aggrevation of political extreme situations' and 'the intensification of conflicts' and the latter guided by 'a vision of a peaceful normal situation characterized by general harmony' and the eventual 'resolution' of conflicts.[31] Similarly, in political science, several authors consciously initiated a turn from pessimistic analyses of extreme ideological contestation into a call for moderate civic peace through negotiation, compromise, the equal representation of interests, and integration, and constant reintegration, of citizens into the political process. This shift had institutional and procedural aspects, on the one hand, but spelled a change of mentality and analytical perspective, on the other.

Sternberger was amongst the postwar authors who critically reconsidered the recently introduced democratic institutions. Sternberger particularly theorized the election of representatives as an inherently meaningful form of political existence and an expression of civic mentality rather than a mere technical procedure for government-

---

[30] Rudolf Smend, 'Integrationslehre', [1956], in *Staatsrechtliche Abhandlungen und andere Aufsätze* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), 480.

[31] Frieder Günther, *Denken vom Staat her: Die bundesdeutsche Staatsrechtslehre zwischen Dezision und Integration 1949–1970* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 35.

formation.[32] These considerations were largely motivated by the experience of the

Weimar Republic, whose downfall Sternberger attributed partly to its flawed system

of list-based proportional voting; in order not to produce another Weimar, a simple

majority rule had to be introduced. Sternberger's concrete institutional solutions thus

reflect his general attempt to lay the foundations for a move from the political crisis,

military occupation, and state of exception toward a stabilized republic with a

successfully internalized democratic culture. 'Real political life, always and

everywhere, consists of strife [*Streit*] and peace [*Frieden*], of settlement and contract',

Sternberger wrote, proposing particularly simple majority voting as a form of 'peace

agreement' between interests and inclinations.[33] Erstwhile nationalist activism was to

be turned into responsible activity in the 'peaceful strife of opinions and purposes', a

principle best secured by majority voting, which created personal bonds between

citizens and politicians, rather than by the distance-inducing mechanicality of list-

based elections.[34] The emphasis, not on strife *or* peace, but on strife *and* peace, which

we encounter later in Sternberger's 1960 essay, was thus conceptually prepared in his

work in the late 1940s and was intimately linked with institutional considerations.

As noted, the turn from the exception and extreme to the normal was, however, not

merely a shift of normative load, but a turn to an other mode of thought. While

Sternberger shared many aims and formulations with his erstwhile teacher Jaspers,

Sternberger's perspective was significantly more oriented toward the normal case. In

---

[32] Dolf Sternberger, 'Macht und Ohnmacht des Wählers', [1947], in *Die Große Wahlreform: Zeugnisse einer Bemühung* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1964), 60-70.

[33] Dolf Sternberger, 'Über die Wahl, das Wählen und das Wahlverfahren', [1946], in *Die Große Wahlreform: Zeugnisse einer Bemühung* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1964), 17.

[34] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 68-9.

his prewar *Existenzphilosophie* Jaspers had discussed various kinds of limit situation (*Grenzsituation*) in human life, such as struggle, death, chance, or guilt,[35] and he still analyzed the political culture of the Federal Republic in similar terms. Especially violence or force (*Gewalt*) was the central limit situation of politics, which, as the term indicated, was not a proper part of politics. Yet politics essentially consisted of coming to terms with violence, and violence was thereby capable of expressing what was paramount in politics and political existence. Violence itself, however, was 'suprapolitical', providing the motivation, which gave political views 'a structure'.[36]

Their substantial differences notwithstanding, Jaspers's conceptualization of the logic of politics and violence came close to Schmitt, who linked politics and the political with the possibility of the physical destruction of the enemy in war. Even if war did not always occur, it was 'the *presupposition*, always present as a genuine possibility, that determines human action and thought in a characteristic way and thereby generates specifically political behavior'.[37] For both Jaspers and Schmitt, the eventual possibility of violence thus co-formed the political, even when the risk did not materialize, and this possibility had existential significance for the political community. Both thinkers also agreed that a complete decoupling of politics and violence, for instance through the saint-like refusal of self-defence or the utopian disappearance of war through global pacifism or world state, would spell the end of politics in general.[38]

---

[35] Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Munich: Piper, 1994[1919]), 229-80.

[36] Jaspers, *Atombombe*, 57.

[37] Schmitt, *Begriff*, 34–5.

[38] Jaspers, *Atombombe*, 63. Schmitt, *Begriff,* 54.

Sternberger's notion of politics, which was *conceptually* linked with the prospects of peace, was clearly at odds with both above accounts. His 1960 essay can be read as manifesting an implicit struggle with the existential perspective of the previous academic generation, which rather underlined battle, exception, decision, and other limit situations. Amidst the generalized misgivings about *Bundesrepublik* and the ideological confusion of the early Cold War, normalization was the call of the day. A proponent of militant democracy, Sternberger was by no means dismissive of the potential for overpoliticization and ideological polarization in parliamentary democracy, either. He emphasized a sufficient, but not excessive level of political conflict as an irremovable part of democratic politics throughout, and his theory of the political as peace was by no means pacifistic, utopistic, or naïve. Rather it only had a different internal structure, focus, and argumentative strategy.

3. From Politics to the Political: 1945-1960

To fully understand the import of Sternberger's 1960 text, we must engage with the gradual genesis of its key propositions in Sternberger's postwar work, starting at *Stunde Null*, to see how Sternberger conceptually paved the way for his conceptualization of the political in terms of peace. In the following, I will disentangle the key elements of this conceptualization and follow their routes across the postwar intellectual landscape. I first note some 'formal' qualities of Sternberger's concept of politics and, consequently, of the political – in other words analyze what *kind* of a concept he was after and what functions the concept was supposed to fulfill.

After this I assess the content of Sternberger's concept, namely his ideas of peace and strife as the key qualifying categories of the political.

The aim here is to show that Sternberger's notion of the political did not emerge abruptly in conditions of established normal politics after hostilities had been terminated, a republic founded, and hardships transformed into the optimism of 'the economic miracle'. Rather the central elements of this theory arose from the immediate post-1945 military, political, cultural, and economic crisis. By having been condensed into Sternberger's key concepts, the crisis experience still reverberated in Sternberger's argumentation in 1960, although the exterior situation had significantly improved. The peace, with reference to which Sternberger theorized the political, was thus not an already established and secured peace, self-sufficiently cherised and generalized into a supposedly universal criterion for politics, or an idealized peace for angels. Rather it was a pragmatic peace, yet to be achieved, and a political peace, which was humanly possible only insofar as it was institutionally prepared.

What kind of a concept did Sternberger strive for? First of all, his concept of politics was linked with an anthropological theory of the human being, and already this set the level of generality for the prospective conceptualization of the political. In his 1946 radio broadcasts, Sternberger started with the Aristotelian postulate that 'the human being was by nature a political being'.[39] In 'Macht und Sitte' two years later, he called for a new and equally comprehensive concept of politics -- certainly not an idealistic Hegelian concept, but 'a humane concept', intrinsically tied up with the concrete political reality of the day and linked with a theory of the human being. Sternberger

---

[39] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden*, 79.

was after a concept that could answer the basic question: how was politics possible for the human being, or how was it 'humanly possible' (*menschenmöglich*)?[40] The basic motivation thus continued the explicitly Aristotelian starting points of the radio broadcasts. Also the 1960 text posed its fundamental questions in a similar manner: if the political was conceptually interlocked with peace, it was necessary to ask what peace was and particularly what kind of a peace was possible for, and worth, the human being (*der Menschen* möglich *und ihrer* wert).[41] Given the role of peace as the ground of the political, the two questions were in fact but two formulations of a single question, and the double possibility of politics and peace captured a significant proportion of what it meant to be human in the first place. Like Schmitt's theory, also Sternberger's concept of the political built upon a specific anthropology – the former noting how every genuinely political theory assumed the human being to be evil[42], whereas the latter rather underscored natural sociability. Content aside, the link with anthropology set significant restrictions on where the essence of the political could be found: politics was not only an institutional matter or something that could be externalized to the state or the 'system', but something fundamentally human, and the political, accordingly, had to be conceptualized on the same level of generality.

These starting points gave rise to the second key element in Sternberger's reconceptualization: the emphasis of the human being as the primary subject of politics and the consequent need for a singular concept of the political which would cover both individuals and institutions. Rather than with the great deed of states and

---

[40] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte', 13, 15-16. Cf. Kinkela, *Rehabilitierung*, 192.

[41] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 307-8.

[42] Schmitt, *Begriff,* 61.

statesmen, Sternberger posited in 1946, politics began with each individual in their

everyday life and consisted of the conduct and behaving of people among one

another.[43] In 1948, he similarly posited that 'the human person was the first and last

subject of politics and the real *corps politique'*.[44] In 1960, Sternberger considered the

traditional focus on the state in political theory understandable per se, for state was

the most prominent guarantor of peace; yet only peace as the defining feature of the

political turned the state into a central political phenomenon, he claimed, thus

reversing the logic the state and the political vis-à-vis older state theories.[45] This was

also Schmtt's move in the opening sentence of his essay, proposing that the concept

of the state presupposed the concept of the political, rather than the other way around,

as Georg Jellinek amongst others had claimed.[46] While Schmitt loosened the

conceptual link between the state and the political in order to emphasize the autonomy

of the political, politics, for him, was still a public matter and a question of collective

existence rather than relying on individuals' private amities or enmities.[47] Sternberger,

by contrast, widened the scope of the political, based on his earlier conviction that

there existed only one and single politics, which applied equally to individuals and

states.[48] This served to underline the autonomy of the political vis-à-vis the state, yet

it also set further restrictions on how the political could be conceptualized, as the

essence of the political now had to be something common to individuals and states

alike. This widening move was partially motivated by the context-bound need to, first,

---

[43] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden*, 74-5.

[44] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte', 17.

[45] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 305.

[46] Schmitt, *Begriff*, 20.

[47] Ibid., 29-30.

[48] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 79.

deviate from the German tradition and, second, to popularize politics relying on strong civic participation and to 'resell' it to German citizens, who, after authoritarian rule, presumably cherished ideals of unpolitical passivity. To depict politics as relevant for people's everyday life was, in the postwar situation, per se an act of democratization, which carried conceptual consequences for Sternberger's later thinking.

Third, Sternberger also reacted against the earlier German tradition of state politics by proposing the primacy of domestic politics over foreign affairs.[49] The three main domains of politics and the political were the everyday life of individuals, (by extension) domestic politics, and (by further extension) international relations. In 1946, Sternberger proposed that in the current conditions of unfreedom and occupation, primacy should be given to domestic politics in the widest sense of organizing the life of individuals and groups within a community[50] and that this kind of domestic politics was also the best form of external policy, as it curbed authoritarianism and militarism.[51] This context-bound primacy of domestic politics gave Sternberger's later theory its particular structure: his was a theory of the primarily domestic political, which he then extended upon the interaction between states. Schmitt's doctrine, by contrast, had primarily covered external relations between states in an era when Germany was struggling to regain its international sovereignty, and he only secondarily and derivatively applied the same principles to relations within the state. In fact, Schmitt's original 1927 essay hardly mentioned

---

[49] See also Kinkela, *Rehabilitierung*, 182-5.

[50] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 29.

[51] Sternberger, 'Über die Wahl', 35.

domestic politics, whereas for the more widely read 1932 book version Schmitt added

discussion of civil war, the possibility of which was the criterion for the domestic

political – a paradoxical phenomenon and utterly uncalled for in Schmitt's categories,

as internal enmity implied instability and possible dissolution of the political

community. In terms of its argumentative logic, Sternberger's reconceptualization

proceeded in reversed order. Individuals, human communities, and international

relations were all to be covered by 'the political', which, again, set relatively high

requirements for the prospective concept of the political.

Fourth, the anthropological premise, discussed above, implied the ubiquity and

inescapability of the political. Even the presumably 'non-political laypeople' were

'political beings from morning to night'[52] and 'constantly practiced politics'

regardless of whether they noticed this or not.[53] There was no escaping politics in

Sternberger's sense, although many 'considered or even declared' themselves to be

'non-political', as he repeated in a 1946 essay in *Die Wandlung*.[54] The co-editor

Jaspers equally emphasized the ubiquity of the political: 'There is nothing in the being

and deeds of humans which does not also have a political meaning',[55] he noted, also

stressing the need to comprehend the political (*das Politische*) 'as the fate to which

everyone contributes through action or inaction'.[56] Whereas the primacy and ubiquity

of the Schmittian 'political' followed from its conceptual link with the potential of

---

[52] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden*, 78.

[53] Ibid., 79.

[54] Sternberger, 'Über die Wahl', 14.

[55] Jaspers, *Atombombe*, 50.

[56] Karl Jaspers, 'Wahrheit, Freiheit und Friede', [1958], in *Hoffnung und Sorge: Schriften zur deutschen Politik 1945–1965* (Munich: Piper, 1965), 185.

conflict, which could never be completely excluded in real-life politics, the constant presence of the Sternbergerian 'political' was rather a consequence of the human tendency to communal existence and natural sociability, as reflected in his different underlying anthropology.

The idea of the ubiquity and inevitability of politics also carried a reference to the typically German problem of the unpolitical man – a highly topical consideration in the postwar context, when memories of the seemingly unpolitical middle classes having paved the way for Hitler were still fresh and those accused of Nazi crimes had defended themselves by referring to the allegedly non-political character of their backgrounds or activities.[57] In this context, the ubiquity of the political implied citizens' inescapable responsibility for what happened around them. Being political was thus not only a descriptive category applicable to various objects, but also an attribute of individuals and a task they were expected to perform. No one 'is allowed to be 'unpolitical', because no one can be unpolitical', Sternberger reasoned.[58]

The fifth formal quality of Sternberger's notion of the political was its inherent normativity. He brought politics so close to good politics that this relation turned almost definitional, and an unmistakably normative layer of meanings entered his conceptualization. In the 1946 radio broadcasts, Sternberger noted that the relentless politics of 'brutes' and 'go-getters' was actually 'no politics at all'.[59] Another 1946 essay proposed that politics, 'or to use a different expression, which only means the

---

[57] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 86.

[58] Ibid., 79.

[59] Ibid., 85.

same: good politics', was 'a human affair' and the 'task of human beings'.[60] His relatively more academic 1948 essay, explicitly sketching a concept of politics for the recently founded discipline of political science, spelled the normativity point explicitly: 'There are no definitions which would not contain a normative element: to define politics is necessarily and straightforwardly to define *good* politics'.[61] The formulation reflects Sternberger's Aristotelian premises. His notion of politics aimed to capture not only the de facto existing, but also what in the natural order of things would eventually unfold with respect to the inherent telos of the object of definition – or, to put that more bluntly, what *should* be, whereas Schmitt's conceptualization rather aimed at what *could* be in the extreme case. Predictably, the inherent aim of politics was peace[62], and politics was good, or politics in the first place, insofar as it actualized this telos.

Equipped with these formal characteristics of, and expectations for, Sternberger's prospective concept of the political, let us finally turn to the substantive interpretations he proposed. In Sternberger's 1946 characterization, politics – which was synonymous with good politics – consisted of the *good* conduct and good manners, and 'decency' (*Anstand*) was the 'A and O of politics'.[63] Particularly democracy was about *Sitte* (translatable as customs, conventions, or mores) as well as social intercourse between humans.[64] Consequently, a theory of good manners was

---

[60] Sternberger, 'Über die Wahl, das Wählen und das Wahlverfahren', [1946], in *Die große Wahlreform: Zeugnisse einer Bemühung* (Cologne: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1964), 15.

[61] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte', 20.

[62] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 85.

[63] Ibid., 49.

[64] Ibid., 24.

also were political science and political theory began and ended[65] -- a patently

overblown formulation, which nevertheless informs us about the starting points of

Sternberger's project of disciplinary reconceptualization. Sternberger depicted politics

as a way of achieving things in human interaction, and one could do this by force and

conquest, but generally more effectively by more refined means. The above-cited

formulation that the elbow politics of brutes was actually no politics alluded to the

international politics of the Third Reich, although Sternberger rather illustrated this

with reference to a tenant securing their opportunity to play the piano by cleverly

negotiating with the neighbors and a passenger attaining a seat in a growded tram by

skillful diplomacy rather than force.[66]

In a barely concealed retort to Schmitt, Sternberger maintained that anyone who did

not step aside on crowded tram stairs turned others into enemies – which, for

Sternberger, served to show how 'friend/enemy relations were by no means primary

relations, like a once famous political theorist posited', but enmity was produced by

action.[67] Good politics was the art of avoiding unnecessary enmities, and, vice versa,

the concessions inherent in good politics enabled the attainment of goals otherwise

impossible. 'Sociable decency' (*geselliger Anstand*) made 'a lot possible', and in his

modified version of the Bismarckian dictum Sternberger defined politics as 'the art of

the possible within good manners [*die Kunst des Möglichen innerhalb der guten*

Sitte]'.[68]

---

[65] Ibid., 44-5.

[66] Ibid., 75-77, 83-85.

[67] Ibid., 89.

[68] Ibid., 93.

As noted, Sternberger first asked for the specifically political in 'Macht und Sitte' in 1948. However, his proposal remained abstract therein and was still expressed in the traditional terms of 'politics' rather than 'the political'. Politics, Sternberger argued, was a combination of the substance matter of power relations and the principle of *Sitte* which gave it a form: 'Politics [is] the civilized use of power [*gesitteter Machtgebrauch*] and – equally – powerful, mighty customs [*machtvolle, mächtige Sitte*]'.[69] Also politics as science, Sternberger noted, was therefore more than a collection of rules guiding the actions of civilized states, yet also more than merely the 'analysis of relations of power ("friend/enemy relations")'. Escaping the narrow confines of realistic and idealistic theories alike, politics consisted simultaneously of both 'power and custom, custom and power; will and spirit, spirit and will; material and form, form and material'.[70] Politics as 'civilized power' was 'humanly possible' (*menschlich möglich*) and 'humanly necessary' (*menschlich nötig*)[71], thus fulfilling the first conceptual criterion discussed above.

But what, exactly, was it that made such politics political? Sternberger left the question unanswered until his 1960 inaugural address. In tracing the the particularly political, as opposed to politics, Sternberger first denied that the political could be found in mores/customs (*Sitte*), decisions alone, or the state itself, although the study of customs, decisions, or institutional forms as the three main parts of political science

---

[69] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte', 20.

[70] Ibid., 21.

[71] Ibid.

often came across typically political phenomena.[72] The political was now clearly

something different than merely a nominalized adjective derived from 'politics' as the

civilized use of power. It had a separate criterion, which Sternberger found in the

category of peace. In so doing, Sternberger revitalized some of his earlier bold claims.

In his radio essays almost fifteen years earlier, he had proposed that peace was 'the

innate aim [*das eingeborene Ziel*] of politics'[73], that politics was 'by its very nature

always the politics of peace',[74] and that the term *Friedenspolitik* was therefore

actually a pleonasm.[75] In a 1956 reply to Morris Janowitz's essay, which had

explicitly asked how one should define the political, Sternberger introduced his idea

of peace as the subject matter (*Gegenstand*) of politics and saw social integration as

an 'innate [*eingeborene*] ... human endeavor'.[76] Some four years later, peace was 'the

subject matter [*Gegenstand*] and aim [*Ziel*] of politics'.[77] Peace was also closely

intertwined with the concept of the state, for the 'essence' (*Wesen*) of the state was

peace, as formulated in 1959.[78] While these earlier propositions suggested the

centrality of peace for all political life, the conceptual identification of *the political*

with peace only followed in the 1960 essay. Peace was the 'the ground [*Grund*] and

characteristic [*Merkmal*], and the norm [*Norm*] of the political', and the political was

to be understood as 'the domain of endeavors to establish peace, to preserve peace, to

---

[72] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 300-1.

[73] Sternberger, *Radio-Reden,* 85.

[74] Ibid., 86.

[75] Ibid.,

[76] Dolf Sternberger, 'Bemerkungen über den Gegenstand der Politik', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 8 (1956): 402.

[77] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 304-5.

[78] Sternberger, 'Haß im Staatsleben', 82.

guarantee, to protect, and ... to defend peace'.[79] As peace was 'the ground of the political', Sternberger reasoned, world peace was the 'ground [*Grund*] and task [*Aufgabe*] of world politics', and any war that was not waged in order to 'establish or defend peace', was not a political means, but something else.[80] Sternberger never formulated the matter quite explicitly, but combined with his previous normative points about the politics of brutes not being politics at all, we can conclude that, for Sternberger, any politics that was not oriented toward peace was not politics in an emphatic sense at all because it lacked the feature that would make it so (that is, the political, the characteristic and aim of which peace was).

This principle applied to domestic and external politics alike, and in sketching his theory, Sternberger oscillated between the two levels. In the 1946 radio broadcasts, he illustrated international politics by comparisons with everyday situations, but hardly mentioned domestic parliamentary politics, whereas the 1948 essay covered both. Since the mid-1950s, his interest, however, turned primarily to parliaments, elections, and parliamentary opposition, and it was in this context that Sternberger developed some of the key points that would accompany and specify his 1960 concept of the political. Let us therefore briefly note the key points in Sternberger's theory of domestic political strife.

For Sternberger, institutionalized intra-parliamentary opposition served the vital functions of critique, control, and providing a political alternative to the government, and it could fullfil these functions the better the freer it was from restrictions such as

---

[79] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 304-5.

[80] Ibid., 306.

party discipline. Such internalized counter-positioning was beneficial for the whole political community in providing what Sternberger called 'integration through polarity'.[81] The continued existence of an institutionalized parliamentary opposition, however, could not be fully explained with reference to the mere aspect of struggle for power (or what Sternberger here called 'the friend/enemy principle'). He explicitly rejected Schmitt's friend-enemy theory, Gaetano Mosca's theory of the ruling class, and Max Weber's interpretation of the political in terms of competitive struggle as incapable of explaining the 'astonishing phenomenon' of parliamentary opposition. Neither could the abstract principle of tolerance or the practical necessity to make compromises explain why the structure of two groups opposing each other in the parliament remained also in cases where one side could permanently suppress the other. It would thus be equally mislead to interpret compromising as 'the fundamental category of the political [*Grundkategorie des Politischen*]', like unnamed 'others' had done.[82]

The point in Sternberger's 1955 passage was to underline how the perspectives of *both* conflict and compromise were needed to make sense of political phenomena, and that the political could not be reduced to either element alone. This was immediately

---

[81] Dolf Sternberger, 'Opposition des Parlaments und Parlamentarische Opposition', [1955], in *Schriften III: Herrschaft und Vereinbarung* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1980), 342.

[82] Ibid., 362-3. This was most likely an allusion to Hans Kelsen, who gave compromise a prominent position in his democratic theory (Hans Kelsen, *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1929], 57-8, 63, 102). Sternberger himself (*Radio-Reden,* 43) had, however, similarly emphasized compromise in his theorizing of the political: 'The essence of politics amongst the free and tolerant ... is the readiness to compromise, to sincere compromise'. The remark therefore carried an air of self-correction, too.

reflected in Sternberger's conceptualization of political conflict. Not the 'elimination', but only the 'regulation of the quarrel' was needed, as he noted in 1959. It was essential to ensure that 'purely intellectual weapons' were used – and only this 'guaranteed inner peace' and 'a pacified society', which could give rise to a proper state, whose essence was peace.[83] Similarly, the 'peace' with reference to which Sternberger defined the political in 1960 was not the absence of conflicts: rather than being 'repelled or precluded, let alone abolished', quarrel was to be 'regulated', taken through a process of 'civilization', and in fact 'institutionalized' into the constitution in the form of parliamentary opposition.[84] The state was thus 'the site and area of actualized peace',[85] but this peace was essentially a procedural and institutional achievement and something to be 'attained anew every day',[86] rather than a matter of wishfully assuming, or even intentionally striving for, the de facto lack of differences as a substantial goal.

To better conceptualize the procedural aspect of political conflict, and thereby qualify his understanding of politics in terms of peace, Sternberger in 1955 resorted to the image of political activity as play or game (*Spiel*). Although the notion of *Spiel* is not mentioned once in the 1960 essay, it provides the text with an underlying structure and makes its key claims more comprehensible. Game or play was closely linked with a theory of the political constitution and 'the theory of the political in general' (*Theorie des Politischen überhaupt*).[87] Institutionalized parliamentary opposition

---

[83] Sternberger, 'Haß im Staatsleben', 82-3.

[84] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 308-9.

[85] Ibid., 305.

[86] Ibid., 310.

[87] Sternberger, 'Opposition', 362.

could only be understood in this light: opposition was a form of activity based upon respect for the rules of the game, self-regulation of one's actions, and recognition of the adversary as a legitimate and indispensable co-player. It was not necessary to 'love the enemies [*die Feinde zu lieben*]', but to 'accept the adversary [*Gegner gelten zu lassen*]'[88] as someone to be tolerated rather than annihilated as soon as this was possible. Sternberger was not alone with such views, and here his general theory of the political, as reflected also in the 1960s, is inextricably tied with the postwar task of rethinking the role of political opposition. Gustav Radbruch and Karl Jaspers, both fellow authors of the reformist *Die Wandlung* journal, used almost identical wordings. Radbruch lamented that Germans typically considered their 'political adversary [*politische Gegner*] either fool or criminal'[89] and waged 'party battle' like 'a war of destruction against intellectual or moral inferiors', whereas in reality the political opposition was as necessary as the government, and the battle was to be waged 'only with fair means'.[90] Jaspers, for his part, noted that 'the political adversary [*Gegner*] is not an enemy [*Feind*]'.[91] This also applied on the collective level of political parties, which were, by definition, always numerous and which endorsed the existence of other parties rather than seeking to exterminate them.[92] The key programmatic proposition by the *Die Wandlung* authors was to transform the destructive political hatred based on irreconcilable world-views into productive democratic contestation.

---

[88] Sternberger, 'Haß im Staatsleben', 83.

[89] Gustav Radbruch, 'Politische Aphorismen', *Die Wandlung* 2, no. 5 (1947): 392.

[90] Gustav Radbruch, 'Neue Parteien – Neuer Geist', [1945], in *Rechtsphilosophie*, ed. Erik Wolf (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1950), 346.

[91] Karl Jaspers, 'Thesen über politische Freiheit', *Die Wandlung* 1, no. 6 (1945-6), 462.

[92] Ibid.

4. Sternberger and Schmitt: Controversy and Compatibility

As shown above, Sternberger's theory of the political, despite its emphasis on peace, was far from a categorical pacifistic rejection of conflict; rather he offered a theory of regulated political strife, aiming at the 'normalization' of German domestic politics. How, exactly, did this relate to the apparent counter-theory proposed by Schmitt in the 1920s? In his attempt to jettison the ideological burden of German political thought, Sternberger looked on Schmitt with scorn, for instance dubbing him 'a once famous political theorist', as noted, and Schmitt's theory clearly prestructured Sternberger's way of asking and answering questions regarding the political. That Sternberger's essay was a 'retort' to Schmitt,[93] is clear, and the counter-position recurs in scholarship with varying strengths. Jan-Werner Müller notes how Schmitt's concept of the political 'came to haunt West German political science' and that particularly Sternberger 'tried to wrest [Schmitt's] concept' by defining the political in terms of peace.[94] Kai Burkhardt labels Sternberger as 'one of Schmitt's archenemies after 1945'.[95] While these characterizations are certainly correct, the Sternberger/Schmitt opposition is easy to overstate and tacitly transform into the quite different proposition that their respective theories were logically or conceptually incompatible. For instance Claudia Kinkela notes how Sternberger's 'definition of peace as the key characteristic of the political is directed against Carl Schmitt's

---

[93] William J. Dodd, *Jedes Wort wandelt die Welt: Dolf Sternbergers politische Sprachkritik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 81.

[94] Müller, 'Preparing', 210.

[95] Editor's note in *Carl Schmitt und die Öffentlichkeit: Briefwechsel mit Journalisten, Publizisten und Verlegern aus den Jahren 1923 bis 1983,* ed. Kai Burkhardt (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013), 138n368.

friend-enemy-relation and against the image of civil war, which is the negation of the civic notion of politics' and speaks of 'Sternberger's and Schmitt's substantially irreconcilable counter-positions'.[96] Also Peter Schneider concludes that Sternberger's and Schmitt's respective concepts of the political 'exclude each other'.[97]

Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the two theories are not quite as mutually exclusive as these formulations would have us belief. Jörg Pannier finds common ground for instance in both thinkers' belief in politics as fate and usefully hints that Sternberger and Schmitt may not be genuine antagonists after all[98], without, however, analyzing the compatibility with regard to their respective concepts of the political. When we assess the conceptual logic of each theory, extensive formal compatibility surfaces, despite obvious and extensive disagreement with regard to human nature and language, the role of sovereignty in politics, the prospects of parliamentarianism, and other differences in their overall thinking. The conceptual opposition regarding the political has to be read contextually: it seems that the context-induced polemic against Schmitt, deriving from the rupture of 1945 and concomitant intellectual needs, caused Sternberger to formulate his own position, on the textual level, more categorically than would have suited his own argumentative ends.

In my interpretation, the polemic style of Sternberger's theory derived from his intellectual debt to Jaspers, a proponent of highly polarized conceptual structures.

---

[96] Kinkela, *Rehabilitierung*, 230, 232-233.

[97] Peter Schneider, 'Dolf Sternberger und der Begriff des Politischen', *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie* 74, no. 1 (1988): 108.

[98] Jörg Pannier, *Das Vexierbild des Politischen: Dolf Sternberger als politischer Aristoteliker* (Berlin: Akademie, 1996), 68

Jaspers for instance opposed -- without intermediating compromises, as he explicitly noted -- the principles of totalitarianism with political freedom[99], suggested a non-compromising either-or of 'political freedom' or 'unpolitical brutality'[100], and contrasted 'force/violence' with 'shared basic motives of being human'.[101] For Jaspers, war and peace were equally opposable, and the reversal of the perspective from war to peace spelled *eo ipso* the 'transformation of the old to the new politics'.[102] Jaspers's schematic categorization, I propose, also guided the rhetoric of Sternberger's theory in general and particularly its polemical anti-Schmittian thrust. As Schmitt belonged to the Jaspersian old politics, oriented towards war, violence, and totalitarian brutality, Schmitt's notion of the political, logically, had to be reversed and redefined in terms of its counterconcepts in order to pave the way for peace, reason, and freedom which characterized 'new politics'.

As a political-theoretical counter-statement to Schmitt, Sternberger's theory, however is less than adequate: it contained argumentative errors and, like many other impatient reactions to Schmitt, relied on a partial misrepresentation of Schmitt's positions rather than an examination of Schmitt's actual arguments. This made Sternberger's text easily refutable from the Schmittian perspective. Schmitt never replied directly, but in a review of Sternberger's essay, Rolf Hinder offered an exemplary Schmittian rebuttal. Hinder claimed, first, that Sternberger's notion by no means excluded war but rather retained war as a possibility and an inevitable opposite of his cherished

---

[99] Jaspers, *Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung,* 11, 45, 120.

[100] Jaspers, *Wohin Treibt die Bundesrepublik,* 156.

[101] Jaspers, *Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung*, 21.

[102] Jaspers, *Atombombe*, 481-2.

peace; second, that Sternberger dismissed the fact that most wars were justified with reference to peace, and this was precisely why the problem of just wars, rather than being solved, emerged in the first place; third, that by making the orientation toward peace the definitional criterion of the political, Sternberger made both war and politics dependent on normative considerations which made them susceptible to ideologization and thereby actually provided a 'discriminating' concept of war of precisely the sort that Schmitt saw as the source of the modern ideologization and totalization of war; and, fourth, that Sternberger's conceptualization not only moved within the logic of friend and enemy he apparently opposed but also intensified and climaxed it.[103] These counterarguments were expectable, but – from the Schmittian perspective and within that language game – devastating.

However, Sternberger's failure also in the eyes of those who did not move within the Schmittian framework was ultimately sealed by his accumulating argumentative errors. Contrary to Sternberger's suggestions, Schmitt never claimed that war was the goal or aim (*Ziel*) of politics – in fact, he explicitly denied this. War, in Schmitt's scheme, was 'definitely not the aim [*Ziel*] and purpose [*Zweck*] or the content [*Inhalt*] of politics', but rather 'the presupposition (that is always present as a genuine possibility) that determines human action and thought in a characteristic way and thereby generates specifically political behaviour'.[104] In Schmitt's distantly Clausewitzian theory[105], war was the ultima ratio of politics, but never an end in itself.

---

[103] See Rolf Hinder, 'Zum Begriff des Politischen: Zugleich eine Auseinandersetzung mit Carl Schmitt und Dolf Sternberger', *Gemeinschaft und Politik* 10, no. 2 (1962): 77-82.

[104] Schmitt, *Begriff*, 34–5.

[105] Timo Pankakoski, 'Containment and Intensification in Political War: Carl Schmitt and the Clausewitzian Heritage," *History of European Ideas* 43, no. 6 (2017): 649-73.

Schmitt explicitly rejected the belligerent view by Ernst Jünger and others in favor of what he called 'the political' view, according to which wars were 'meaningfully waged for the sake of peace'.[106] If he aimed at Schmitt, Sternberger thus shot wide off the mark with his elaboration that wars were Clausewitzian political means only when waged for either bringing about or defending a peace.[107] There was nothing Schmitt would not have accepted here, and neither did Sternberger's proposition that peace was the aim of politics actually reverse anything in Schmitt's original conceptualization of war as a political phenomenon with peace as its goal. The actual disagreement was one regarding the normative implications, such as the (un)acceptability of war, what price should be paid for peace, or what constituted the genuinely political aspect of politics; but the apparent substitution of 'peace' for 'war' in the discussion of the aims of political wars provided no access to the core of the controversy. Sternberger's definition of the political relied on a somewhat mechanical reversal of what he took to be Schmitt's arguments on war rather than of what Schmitt had actually said, which tilted the scales decisively in Schmitt's favor.

In 1960, Sternberger further noted against Schmitt that the essence of the state could be derived from proscription or civil war just as little as the essence of marriage was derivable from divorce.[108] The point, although perhaps rhetorically persuasive, relied on earlier flawed argumentation. In 1948, Sternberger posited that the core substance of politics was power, while customs/mores provided the form. In some respects,

---

[106] Carl Schmitt, 'Politik', [1936], in *Staat, Großraum, Nomos: Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916 bis 1969*, ed. Günter Maschke (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 137.

[107] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 306. Cf. Pannier, *Vexierbild des Politischen*, 59-60.

[108] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 307.

politics was like a marriage, which also contained power relations, yet it would be absurd, Sternberger claimed, to define marriage on this basis, as this would imply that the aim (*Ziel*) of marriage was divorce. It was equally impossible to consider the friend/enemy relation as the fundamental category of the political, for this would 'inavoidably' imply the absurdity that 'the aim [*Ziel*] of politics was war – war, which abolishes politics!'[109] Here Sternberger, however, projected upon Schmitt his own assumptions hardly shared by Schmitt. In Sternberger's Aristotelian framework it made sense to see peace as both the essence and the aim of politics, for essence and aim coincided in telos-oriented thought. The logic of Schmitt's theory, however, was rather more Hobbesian, Hegelian, and Clausewitzian. He did not consider war per se as the essence of politics, but rather the core phenomenon in politics was the existential enmity and the friend/enemy distinction, which in some cases led to war; and war was not an essence of politics in the sense of being its key substance, either, but only a characteristically political feature. Even less did Schmitt see such a hypothetical essence as logically implying that war would be the *aim* of politics. These were rather Sternberger's own Aristotelian categories that were selectively filled with quasi-Schmittian content and, expectedly, became absurd. Also the further assumption that war abolished politics is sensible only with respect to Sternberger's own redescription of politics in terms of peace, but posed no logical problem to Schmitt: with Clausewitz, Schmitt maintained that all sensible wars contained a political element, which shaped warfare throughout, and, far from being abolished by war, politics guided war toward the eventual peace. War for war's sake was something else than a form of politics. In his postwar need to gain distance toward the German power state and military tradition, and in order to underscore his own peace

---

[109] Sternberger, 'Macht und Sitte', 19.

orientation, Sternberger ended up projecting more militaristic valuations upon his opponent that Schmitt's actual arguments allow for.

In the 1980s Sternberger revised his theory with points remarkably reminiscent of Schmitt's position, now noting that 'political war' was in fact possible, that it was identical with non-total war, and that military planning was 'political' insofar as it strove to either avoid war altogether or achieve peace by limited warfare.[110] Schmitt had been arguing that the role of political wars was to prevent the totalization of warfare into crusades and enable limited duel-like confrontations in which the enemy would be respected rather than destroyed[111] – a theory which Sternberger summarized in an appendix to his 1960 essay, without, however, observing the parallels with his own considerations, including not only the question of 'political war' but also the call for chivalry respect of the adversary. Schmitt's argument that the political nature of war, beyond any judicial or moral regulation, secured the 'bracketing' of war, may have been logically flawed, empirically optimistic, or driven by dubious ideological motives to justify war, but in terms of the conceptual logic of the political no major deviation is perceivable here.

In 1960, Sternberger operated with the general concept of peace without further qualifications. It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that Sternberger re-engaged with the question of the political and peace in a more nuanced manner and

---

[110] Dolf Sternberger, 'Notizen über das Wort "Politik", seine Wanderungen und Wandlungen', [1981], in *Die Politik und der Friede* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 103.

[111] Carl Schmitt, *Der Nomos der Erde im Völkerrecht des Jus Publicum Europaeum* (Cologne: Greven, 1950).

specifically analyzed the relationship between the two concepts – in so doing bringing his theory yet closer to Schmitt's. There were several rival notions of the political, he proposed, stemming from different eras and traditions, particularly the Aristotelian politological notion, the Machiavellian demonological notion, and the Augustinian eschatological notion, and, correspondingly, there were also three kinds of peace.[112] Sternberger restated his 1960 notion of the political without alterations, albeit underlining how not only peace was the essence of politics, but also politics was the essence of peace, for true peace could be attained by political and institutional means alone.[113] He was after a this-wordly peace that was both 'necessary and possible' for human beings – note the unchanged formulation, deriving from the 1948 depiction of civilized power as humanly possible and necessary –, and this could only be a 'political peace' of agreement, covenant, and settlement of competings interests, not an eschatological peace of salvation or a demonological peace dictated by force.[114] True peace was always 'a precarious and endangered situation' and something that necessitated politics, as Sternberger noted against antipolitical peace movements. Because of similar eschatological overtones, Sternberger now also rejected the postwar premise of his 'great teacher' Jaspers that the atomic age necessitated a fundamental spiritual transformation of the human being. In addressing the humanity as a singular whole rather than a plurality, and in calling for an ethical turn (*Kehre*), such a demand operated outside politics. No Jaspersian 'new politics' could be achieved.[115] Given his own postwar activity in promoting such a change in the journal

---

[112] Sternberger, *Drei Wurzeln,* 384-8.

[113] Sternberger, 'Notizen über "Politik"', 116.

[114] Dolf Sternberger, 'Die Politik und der Friede', [1983], in *Die Politik und der Friede* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 124-6.

[115] Ibid., 127-8.

Die Wandlung ('Transformation'), Sternberger was here reconsidering the argumentative and rhetorical basis of his own 1960 polemics. Reckoning simultaneously with both Jaspers and Schmitt, Sternberger gradually forwent the former's normative dualisms and suprapolitical ethical pathos in favor of the consistently autonomous political and recognition of the limits of human achievement, distantly reminiscent of the latter, thus streamlining his underlying conceptual framework, albeit still conceptualizing the political differently than Schmitt in terms of substance.

A further source of confusion was that, in his original polemical reversal of Schmitt, Sternberger linked the political conceptually with *actual* rather than potential peace. A more careful reading would have revealed Schmitt's characterization of the political in terms of the *possibility* of war (either war between states or civil war). War did not have to actualize in order to be politically significant, but it had to be genuinely possible. Contrary to what Sternberger claimed in 1946, Schmitt thus did not derive the essence of the state from civil war, but he derived the essence of the domestic political from the *possibility* of civil war, as Sternberger quite correctly noted in a 1961 appendix to his essay, also directly citing Schmitt's formulation of this possibility, yet without particularly emphasizing it.[116] The original essay, however, makes no mention of this.

This is important, because not only the (in)correctness of Sternberger's reading of Schmitt but also his ability to utilize Schmittian conceptual logic in support of his own, radically different substantial conceptualization of the political hinges upon the

---

[116] Sternberger, 'Begriff', 315.

possibility point – as does our ability to transcend the level of original mundane quarrels and use elements from both Schmitt's and Sternberger's views for systematic concept-building in political theory. I will conclude the section by suggesting Schmitt's dissociative concept of the political with Sternberger's associative concept and showing that these notions are extensively compatible and can be, if desired, utilized together for systematic conceptualization of the political.

Had Sternberger engaged with the proposal that the political related to the possibility of international war or civil war and reversed *that* idea, he would have come closer to a theory suiting his own postwar argumentative needs – a definition of the political as restricted conflict, leaning on the idea that the situation was political – and that conflicts were to be tolerated – insofar as, and only as long as, peace was a genuine possibility. When oppositions were so intense that peace, agreement, and compromise with the adversary were no longer possible, the situation ceased to be political in the emphatic sense and turned into something else.

Put together, the above elements would make up the admittedly mechanically but at any rate correctly inverted form of Schmitt's theory. Perplexingly, Sternberger in fact suggested such a revised version, relying on *potential* rather than actual peace – albeit only in the 1980s and without much elaboration. In a public engagement with Schmitt's legacy immediately after his death, Sternberger wrote: 'In oppositions of power, interests, attitudes toward life, [or] organizing principles, the political consists of the *possibility* of negotiation, contract, agreement, in short: of peace. Wherever this

possibility perishes, 'the political' itself is destroyed'.[117] Sternberger had presumably

realized the problems in his reading of Schmitt and tacitly adjusted his vocabulary; he

never elaborated the consequences, though.

So far also scholarship has overlooked this crucial change and the associated political-

theoretical potential. Jörg Pannier cites the passage in his extensive treatment of the

Sternberger/Schmitt relation, yet he does not emphasize the element of potentiality at

all.[118] Peter Schneider arguably misconstrues the logics of both theories in claiming

that the above passage implies that Schmitt's and Sternberger's respective concepts of

the political 'exclude each other'.[119] Especially the modified 1985 version rather

seems to have extensive common ground with Schmitt's theory. For Schmitt, the

situation is political whenever war is genuinely possible, whence it follows that only

the utopian condition of perfect peace is non-political; for Sternberger, by contrast,

the situation is political whenever peace is genuinely possible, which only excludes

the condition of totalized and self-purposeful wars of destruction; between these two

excluded alternatives, there remains an extensive area of conditions which would be

'political' in light of both criteria. Schmitt and Sternberger looked at the overlapping

area from opposite directions, the former focusing on the intensification of enmity

into war, while the latter theorized the de-escalation of conflicts into relative peace.

Schmitt's and Sternberger's political philosophies, obviously, built upon differing,

perhaps outright incompatible or even incommensurable premises stemming from the

---

[117] Dolf Sternberger, 'Irrtümer Carl Schmitts: Bemerkungen zu einigen seiner Hauptschriften',

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, June 1, 1985. Emphasis added.

[118] Pannier, *Vexierbild des Politischen,* 89.

[119] Schneider, 'Dolf Sternberger', 108.

former's reading of Hobbes, Hegel, de Maistre, and others, and the latter's modernized Aristotelianism. These theories also had different normative ramifiations, reflecting the authors' dissimilar value priorities. Yet, the two concepts of the political that arose out of this theorizing are not mutually exclusive in conceptual and logical terms. Further political theorizing is needed to construct a Schmittian-cum-Sternbergerian concept of the political and to show its supposed utility for conceptualizing modern democratic politics; this article refrains to the particularly intellectual historical task of having suggested the compability despite rhetorical fire and fury and having relativized the weight of the polemics by a contextual reading.

5. Conclusions

Sternberger's key contribution for political theory is to have theorized the 'associative' and peace-oriented criterion of the political in a most challenging historical situation. On a merely textual reading, one could interpret his conceptualization as reflecting the already pacified and normalized political situation at the turn of the 1960s and offering a clear-cut counter-position to Schmitt's theory which rather emerged out of the ideological polarization in the late Weimar Republic. More contextual analysis, however, suggests that Sternberger's concept of the political arose out of the immediate post-1945 instability and the consequent need for political normalization, thus providing the outline of a desired but yet only prospective peace.

Experiences of military occupation and loss of sovereignty, nation-wide economic crisis, continued lure of authoritarianism, and the threat of antidemocratic forces

overturning democratic parliamentarianism from within were not confined to the interwar era alone, but were most acutely present when Sternberger embarked on his quest for the political. This experience, coupled with the demand for systematic conceptual basis for the nascent political science and the need to repel the tradition of authoritarianism and militarism, largely determined the way Sternberger asked the question of the political – and prestructured the potential answers. Despite its surface-level polemics with Schmitt's notion, Sternberger's theory actually covers much of the same ground, albeit with differing conclusions. Once we clear out intentional miscomprehension and other context-induced trivialities, Sternberger's concept of the political serves as a potential building block for contemporary theorizing: first, in its commitment to constitutionally guaranteed civic participation and explicit rebuttal of totalitarianism, Sternberger's concept offers most of the advantages of Schmitt's corresponding concept without the ideological baggage therein; second, it is directly applicable in constructive theorizing of the domestic, democratic, and parliamentary political rather than merely the authoritative suppression thereof; and, third, far from being naïvely pacifistic, it takes seriously both political conflicts and their regulation, both strife and peace – doubtless an assett in the tumultous political landscape of contemporary Europe.