

Heroic Deed

BY [SONDERFORSCHUNGSBEREICH 948](#)

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1. Definition

A heroic deed is any kind of action by an actor that is the subject of a [heroization process](#).^[1] It is true that there are forms of heroization that are not directed at a specific deed performed by a [heroic figure](#) but, for example, at their attitude. In many cases, however, an active or passive action forms the reference point of heroization processes, is represented in the form of a heroic narrative and is interpreted as evidence of the heroic qualities attributed to the person.

2. Models and heuristics

2.1. The heroic deed as 'heroic action' (Max Weber)

Given the range of deeds that are considered heroic, a heuristic approach to the phenomenon 'heroic deed' must be based on a broad understanding of action. Max Weber's concept of action is fitting because it includes not only physical actions but also speech acts, symbolic acts and forms of omission: "By 'action' is meant human behaviour linked to a subjective *meaning* on the part of the

actor or actors concerned; such action may be either overt, or occur inwardly – whether by positive action, or by refraining from action, or by tolerating a situation.”[2] With this approach, the passive endurance of suffering or the mere perseverance of an agonal situation can also be understood as a heroic action.

Following Weber, a heroic act can be ‘social action’, insofar as heroic action is understood as ‘selfless action for others’: “Such behaviour is ‘social action’ where the meaning intended by the actor or actors is related to the behaviour of *others*, and the action is so oriented.”[3] With the intentionality of action – i.e. the “subjective meaning” on which it is based or assumed – Weber’s definition provides a criterion of distinction that separates intentional action (or omission) from accidental or forced action/behaviour. Since the heroic meaning is only attributed retrospectively and via communication, the intention is also only projected onto the action after the fact.

Similarly, heroic action can be understood as a form of what Weber calls ‘value-rational action’. In contrast to other forms of social action (purposive-rational; affectual/emotional; traditional), value-rational action is characterised by the fact that, regardless of the consequences and the most appropriate choice of means, the actor acts only according to a believed value (ethical, aesthetic or religious, etc.).[4] The values associated with actions interpreted as heroic are dependent on social negotiation processes, are culturally determined, and are subject to historical changes.

2.2. Relational model (Leo Braudy)

According to Leo Braudy, four essential factors are responsible for an ‘act of fame’: the actor, the laudable act, the immediate recognition by a community and a time-persistent medium (“a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since”[5]). Drawing on Braudy, a heroic deed can be defined as a relational structure to illuminate the construction processes and the performative negotiation of a heroic narrative between an action, the hero, an adversary and the adoring community.

2.2.1. Hero and adversary

The first relation exists between a hero and an adversary or rather between a protagonist and an antagonist. Heroic deeds in a broad sense are set against the background of an antagonistic moment or a conflict of values. As a rule, heroic action must overcome resistance – from the extraordinary to superhuman, both internally (psychological) or externally –, in the form of an individual antagonist, socio-political conditions, inhibiting internalised norms or another resistive force. The higher the resistance/the danger/the risk to be overcome by an action, the more it lends itself for heroization by a community.

2.2.2. Actor and deed

Several criteria must be met in the relation between actor and deed. The first prerequisite for heroization is the *ability to identify* the deed with an actor. The *motivation* of the actor is also important. Since heroic action should be interpretable as a value-rational action, the less a deed serves the actor’s own interests or the greater the collective benefit, the more likely it is to be heroized. Only the value-

rational motivation of the actor, not the success, determines whether or not an action leads to heroization.

From the perspective of the actor, the *moment of decision* also comes into focus. Every action presupposes a decision, which is based on a specific time frame. In principle, the rapid decision seems to correspond to the heroic, while a lengthy risk assessment can only have a heroic effect as a complement to an otherwise quickly determined action. Both the temporal and the motivational-ethical criterion are sufficient to prove that the decision to act is heroic. Therefore, the moment of decision is often the subject of representation in art, literature or other media.

2.2.3. Deed, audience and media

A heroic deed invariably provokes *narration* or *iconic representation* and can be inserted into a chain of events that constitute the heroic narrative. In narrative or visual representation, an action is elevated to a heroic deed, for instance by attributing epochal significance to it (heroic action then means the restoration of a ideal state or the beginning of a new order) and by having a community-shaping effect even over a longer period of time.

In representations of heroic deeds, specific iconographies or formulaic ways of expression often emerge, for example in the form of significant attributes that symbolically point to the heroic act. This can lead to the development of an intrinsic aesthetic logic of heroic deeds that manifests itself in mass media, visual arts, literature and music, where it is sometimes also addressed in a self-reflexive manner.

2.3. Communication model (Roman Jakobson)

Adopting Roman Jakobson's approach, a heroic deed can be considered a communication phenomenon[6]: An *actor* (warrior, author, scientist) performs an *achievement* (deed, work, invention) in a certain *field* (war, art, science). This achievement is conveyed through a *medium* (literature, image, song) and a *code* (language, art, music) to *recipients* who evaluate it as heroic in its *historical context*.

2.4. Process model

With regard to a heroic action or its narrative presentation, different phases can be determined: In the beginning there is a *conflict*, which is interpreted as the motivation for the act of the heroized figure. There is a *moment of decision*, in which the potential hero has to decide whether or not they want to act. The *execution of the action* leads to a certain outcome, which is then evaluated in a heroization process by adorers/admirers and the public. One result of this process can be the essentialisation of the act itself, which is henceforth regarded as an inseparable and defining part of the hero.

3. References

- 1 This article is based on the collective discussions of the Sonderforschungsbereich 948 “Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms” and the working group “Synthesen” in particular. Individual authors are therefore not named. The models presented in the article were suggested by Achim Aurnhammer and Hanna Klessinger, who subsequently elaborated on this work in Aurnhammer, Achim / Klessinger, Hanna: “Was macht Schillers Wilhelm Tell zum Helden? Eine deskriptive Heuristik heroischen Handelns”. In: Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft 2018, 127-149. DOI: [10.1515/9783110580983-006](https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110580983-006). The article was edited by Georg Feitscher. The article is a work in progress; additions and clarifications are expressly requested. Please feel free to send the editors any suggestions (redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de).
- 2 Weber, Max: *Economy and Society. A New Translation*. Ed. and transl. by Keith Tribe. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2019: Harvard University Press, 78-79. (Emphasis in original.)
- 3 Weber: *Economy and Society*, 2019, 79. (Emphasis in original.)
- 4 Weber: *Economy and Society*, 2019, 103.
- 5 Braudy, Leo: *The Frenzy of Renown. Fame and Its History*. New York 1997: Vintage, 15.
- 6 Jakobson, Roman: “Linguistics and Poetics”. In: Sebeok, Thomas A. (Ed.): *Style in Language*, Cambridge, Mass. 1960: MIT Press, 350-377.

4. Selected literature

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Kontakt

Sonderforschungsbereich 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg
Hebelstraße 25
D-79104 Freiburg im Breisgau

www.compendium-heroicum.de
redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de