



CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON WORLD POLITICS

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# Poststructuralism and International Relations

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BRINGING THE POLITICAL BACK IN

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Jenny Edkins

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BOULDER  
LONDON

Published in the United States of America in 1999 by  
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.  
1800 30th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80301  
www.rienner.com

and in the United Kingdom by  
Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.  
3 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 8LU

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Edkins, Jenny.

Poststructuralism and international relations : bringing the  
political back in / Jenny Edkins.

p. cm. — (Critical perspectives on world politics)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55587-845-8 (hc : alk. paper)

1. International relations—Political aspects. 2. International  
relations—Philosophy. I. Title. II. Series.

JZ1251.P35 1999

327.1'01—dc21

99-21481

CIP

**British Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A Cataloguing in Publication record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements  
of the American National Standard for Permanence of  
Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1984.

5 4 3 2 1

*For David*

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# Preface

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In many areas of social and political theory, the political is being rethought in and through poststructuralist, deconstructivist, feminist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic thought. In international relations the value of this series of approaches to questions of the political remains widely contested. This book aims both to introduce the interested reader to some of the writings that form the basis for this rethinking and to indicate how it is not only relevant but central to an analysis of politics and the political.

The rethinking of the political that is taking place in contemporary theory (and that has indeed been taking place for some time) involves an unsettling of the view of the “subject” of politics. At one time the political subject was assumed to be the sovereign individual, preexisting politics itself. This concept of the subject has been decentered and the notions of existence and temporality on which it was founded problematized. The unsettling of the subject (of theory as well as of politics) has taken place in parallel with a freeing of the colonized subject, albeit still within a postcolonial world, and a reexamination of boundaries of various kinds constructed to keep subjects in their place.

The challenge to international relations comes not only from a realignment and reexamination of subjectivity that leads to a rearticulation of fundamental political questions but also from a reassessment of “the political” itself. If the unsettled subject can no longer be seen simply as friend or enemy, what is “the political” about? If the boundary between the international and the domestic is insecure in more than the traditional sense, can we still draw the line between politics within and anarchy without? Or is the political moment over once the frontier is in place? As we shall see in Chapter 1, a reassessment of what we might mean by these terms leads a number of writers to make a distinction between “politics” and “the political.” It also leads to an analysis that acknowledges the importance of questions of language, discourse, and ideology to a consideration of

the political. Much of what we call “politics” is in many senses “depoliticized” or technologized: the room for real political change has been displaced by a technology of expertise or the rule of bureaucracy.

This book provides an introduction to the work of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek, among others. These writers provide the tools for the rearticulation of the question of the political. They do this, first, by indicating how what we call “politics” has become depoliticized and technologized and, second, by providing some preliminary notions about what a rethinking of the political or a renegotiation of the boundaries of politics might look like.

In the discipline of international relations, poststructuralist writers continue to be grouped together and their work represented as either apolitical or disengaged. That representation extends to scholars who draw on poststructuralist or psychoanalytic work but locate themselves as dissidents within the disciplines of politics and international relations, as well as to those who draw on a feminist starting point, and it is in part a strategy of marginalization. For its critics, “postmodernism” and its exponents either are irresponsibly pluralistic and lacking in standpoint or their work is so unrelated to what we call “the real world” as to be devoid of any useful application. This book demonstrates that, on the contrary, it is precisely in these writings that we find the possibility of “the political” once again being examined and a series of ways of analyzing and contesting the depoliticization or technologization inherent in “politics” explored.

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I would like to thank colleagues within and beyond the discipline of international relations for help and support at different times and my students, graduate and undergraduate, for their engagement with and enjoyment of the ideas presented here. The Aberystwyth Post-International Group provided inspiration and companionship in the early stages of this project, as did discussions following the British International Studies Association conference in York and at the Sovereignty and Subjectivity Conference in Aberystwyth. Particular thanks go to John Edkins, Véronique Pin-Fat, and Steve Smith. I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust and the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK for awards that made the research for the book possible. I have a hidden debt to St. Anne’s College, Oxford, through whose intransigence I escaped an early depoliticization, and a more obvious one to Stuart Hall, whose inspired teaching at the Open University continues to motivate and inform my work.

*Jenny Edkins*

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# Politics, Subjectivity, and Depoliticization

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This chapter sets out the basic framework within which the claim of the book is situated: the claim that in the writings of poststructuralists, deconstructivists, and psychoanalytic thinkers we find tools that enable us to analyze the political and bring it back into the study of the international. In order to make it clear what I am arguing here, it is necessary first to examine what is meant by notions such as “politics” and “depoliticization” and how they relate to my subsequent analysis of the writings of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Žižek on subjectivity and ideology.

I begin by exploring in a very preliminary way the distinction between “politics” and “the political,” terms I use throughout the book. This separation has been discussed by a number of writers—Ernesto Laclau, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Claude Lefort, and Jean-Luc Nancy among them.<sup>1</sup> Michael Dillon has made use of the same differentiation in his reading of Martin Heidegger in relation to security in international politics.<sup>2</sup> I do not go into the complexities of the surrounding disputes about the political and politics in modernity; there is a growing debate on these issues elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> My aim is simply to clarify how I use the terms. The distinction between “politics” and “the political” can be linked with Max Weber’s work on politics and bureaucracy.<sup>4</sup> I contend that following Žižek’s work, this differentiation can be related to notions of subjectivity, and I show how “the political” implicates and produces subjectivity.<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, what we call “politics” is an area of activity that in modern Western society is “depoliticized” or “technologized.” These two terms are more or less synonymous (as far as my usage here goes), but the latter is perhaps more useful as a term because of the sense it conveys that what is going on is something positive. We are not talking about an absence of the political through some sort of lapse or mistake but an express operation of depoliticization or technologization: a reduction to calculability. In this context ideology is the move that conceals the depoliticization of politics

and hides the possibility—the risks—of “the political.” Technologization has its dangers, too, and one of the fields where its perils can be seen is international politics. As examples, I examine briefly the technologization of famine relief and the notion of securitization as a form of extreme depoliticization. In the final section of this chapter, I outline how the authors whose work I discuss later in the book see processes of technologization and depoliticization.

## POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

The distinction I employ here between “politics” and “the political” is similar to that between what is sometimes called a “narrow” meaning of the political and a broader one. In the narrow sense, the political is taken to be that sphere of social life commonly called “politics”: elections, political parties, the doings of governments and parliaments, the state apparatus, and in the case of “international politics,” treaties, international agreements, diplomacy, wars, institutions of which states are members (such as the United Nations), and the actions of statesmen and -women. As James Donald and Stuart Hall point out, what gets to be counted as politics in this narrow form is not in any sense given. It is the result of contestation. It is ideological, contingent on a particular organization of the social order, not natural.<sup>6</sup> Donald and Hall refer to the struggle in the 1970s and 1980s by the women’s movement to extend the range of politics to include, for example, relations of power within the home or between men and women more broadly. “The personal is political” was their slogan. A similar extension of international politics has been advocated by Cynthia Enloe, this time with the phrase “the personal is international.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the question of what gets to count as “politics” (in the narrow sense) is part of “the political” (in the broader sense): It is a political process. Or in Fred Dallmayr’s words, “Whereas politics in the narrower sense revolves around day-to-day decision making and ideological partisanship . . . “the political” refers to the frame of reference within which actions, events, and other phenomena acquire political status in the first place.”<sup>8</sup>

In the broader sense, then, “the political” has to do with the establishment of that very social order which sets out a particular, historically specific account of what counts as politics and defines other areas of social life as *not* politics. For Claude Lefort, the political is concerned with the “constitution of the social space, of the form of society.”<sup>9</sup> It is central to this process that the act of constitution is immediately concealed or hidden: Hence, “the political is . . . revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured.”<sup>10</sup>

How does this relate to the link that is generally made between “power” and the political? Following Lefort again, “the phenomenon of power lies at the centre of political analysis,” but this is not because relations of power should be seen as autonomous and automatically defining “politics.” Rather, it is because “the existence of a power capable of obtaining generalised obedience and allegiance implies *a certain type of social division and articulation*, as well as a certain type of representation . . . concerning the legitimacy of the social order.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, what is important about power is that it *establishes* a social order and a corresponding form of legitimacy. Power, for Lefort, does not “exist” in any sort of naked form, before legitimation: Rather, the ideological processes of legitimation produce certain representations of power. For a political analysis, in the broadest sense, what needs to be called into question are the conditions of possibility that produced or made conceivable this particular representation of power. The question is, “What change in the principles of legitimacy, what reshaping of the system of beliefs, in the way of apprehending reality, enabled such a representation of power to emerge?”<sup>12</sup>

In any formation of a new state, there are clearly events that would be described as part of “politics” in the narrow sense of the word that are nevertheless significant. But these maneuvers taking place in “politics” do not provide an account in themselves of how one social form rather than another emerges from a period of contestation and struggle. To achieve an understanding of the latter, we need a “political” analysis that examines mutations of the social or symbolic order and how a new model of society is created. In the case of the move to totalitarianism in the USSR, for example, Lefort argues that key to the whole process is that *at the level of fantasy* “what is being created is the model of a society which seems to institute itself without divisions, which seems to have mastery of its own organization, a society in which each part seems to be related to every other and imbued by one and the same project of building socialism.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, what is significant in the examination of totalitarianism is how a new symbolic ideal of society, with forms of legitimation, was instituted, and how this model works as fantasy. An analysis of “the political” in the broader sense would involve an account of how such models of the social are articulated and how they work.

Žižek summarizes the distinction made by Lefort and Laclau as one

between “politics” as a separate social complex, a positively determined sub-system of social relations in interaction with other sub-systems (economy, forms of culture . . . ) and the “Political” [*le politique*] as the moment of openness, of undecidability, when the very structuring principle of society, the fundamental form of social pact, is called into question—in short, the moment of global crisis overcome by the act of founding a “new harmony.”<sup>14</sup>

Once it is decided (by wars, revolutions, and the like) that legitimate authority resides, for example, with a particular state form, what follows is the bureaucratic technique of governance elaborated through recognized expertise and endorsed in the continuance of the state form through the regular, ritual replacement of the placeholders of authority, whether by elections in a democracy or through the rules of succession in a monarchy or dictatorship. As Max Weber has argued, bureaucracy succeeds because of its technical efficiency, and once in place it is difficult to remove.<sup>15</sup> It replaces the need for political decisions: Actions can be determined on purely technical grounds.

Weber distinguishes between legal rational authority and traditional authority on the one hand, both of which operate according to rules and norms, and charismatic authority on the other. It is the latter that is the province of the political leader, one who takes "politics as a vocation." Weber's contrast between the work of the political leader and that of the bureaucrat or civil servant has many parallels with the distinction between "politics" and "the political" that I am making here. He defines politics as any kind of independent leadership in action, or, more particularly, "the leadership of a political association."<sup>16</sup> The latter is a relation of domination supported by the legitimate (that is, accepted as legitimate) use of force or violence: The means peculiar to the "political" is the use of physical force. In the modern world, the political association is the state, and politics by Weber's definition becomes "striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state."<sup>17</sup> The political leader has to take responsibility for decisions in a way that the civil servant or administrator does not, and this involves "impossible" choices.<sup>18</sup> Unlike legal rational or traditional authority, political leadership as charismatic authority involves an ethics that cannot be simply an ethic of ultimate ends or an ethic of responsibility but a fusion of the two. It is in one sense an ethic of decision: Once the decision has been taken, there is no other response than that of the person or subject produced in that process: "Here I stand; I can do no other."<sup>19</sup> Political leadership, "politics as a vocation," or charismatic authority would be what I have called here "the political"; the bureaucracy attendant on legal rational authority, in contrast, would be "politics." Weber points out how charismatic authority cannot persist, becoming routinized, or, in our terms, depoliticized:

In its pure form charismatic authority has a character specifically foreign to everyday routine structures. . . . Indeed, in its pure form, charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.<sup>20</sup>

The legal rational authority upon which modern bureaucracy depends has no legitimacy beyond the legal system upon which the state's existence relies; the establishment of the legal system itself can claim no transcendent foundation. However, this foundation is provided by myth or ideology. As both Derrida and Žižek point out, once the state is in place, the violence that is involved in its foundation as a particular, historic form is forgotten; the state retroactively constitutes the basis for its own authority. What takes place thereafter, within the state apparatus, is not "the political," but a technology of governance. Ironically, this technology is what we call "politics." It claims to be following the law and legal rational systems of authority; its legitimacy and efficacy are assured only as long as the tenuousness of its claim to sovereign power remains hidden and unchallenged.

As feminists in particular have reminded us,<sup>21</sup> the political is not limited to the grand moments of openness or undecidability that arise in between established social systems, where the whole system of legitimacy previously in place has been effectively challenged and a new one not yet installed. It also arises in the undecidability that is found in every moment of decision, since such moments, as Derrida argues, are not guaranteed by law, technology, or custom.<sup>22</sup> They occur when an act takes place that both reinstates and follows the law. The act of decision is a matter of a specific historical moment; it cannot be justified by an appeal to a general law. Each such act both applies and institutes the law. Once the act, or moment of decision, is past, it disappears: Even the fact that it has taken place cannot be confirmed. The law appears retrospectively merely to have been followed. The political comprises in this sense an interminable process of decisioning, of traversing the undecidable, of faithfulness to what Derrida calls the "double contradictory imperative."<sup>23</sup>

In Laclau's terminology, this moment is the "moment of antagonism."<sup>24</sup> Laclau contrasts social forms, whose origin is concealed (and of which "politics" would be one) with "the political": "The social world presents itself to us, primarily, as a sedimented ensemble of social practices accepted at face value, without questioning the founding acts of their institution."<sup>25</sup> For Laclau, however, the social world is not closed or complete but structured around a lack. Social order is characterized by antagonisms that bring to light both the contingency of the institutionalized frameworks of society within which everyday social practice takes place and the existence of other possible resolutions. In the "moment of antagonism," what happens is that "the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible."<sup>26</sup> It is this moment that constitutes "the political." The political itself is constitutive of social order—it is through the political that new social practices are instituted. Furthermore, the political, being a radical departure from sedimented

practices, “cannot appeal to anything in the social order that would operate as its ground: . . . [It] can only have its foundation in itself.”<sup>27</sup>

## SOVEREIGN POLITICS

In Western modernity what we call “politics” is a very specific notion, located within the conceptions of sovereignty: It entails a sovereign political order and a sovereign, autonomous subject.<sup>28</sup> Foucault has argued that “what we need . . . is a political philosophy that isn’t erected around the problem of sovereignty.”<sup>29</sup> But the problem is not just that of sovereignty or a sovereign politics. In his critique of Foucault, Barry Hindess points to the need for a rethinking of “politics”; he notes that “it is not the problem of sovereignty that *we* (another fictional community) need to free ourselves from, but also the problem of political community. In effect, this means finding a way to think about politics in the absence of its defining, constitutive fiction.”<sup>30</sup>

Poststructuralist thought, in its move from “politics” to “the political,” attempts to provide the tools for this rethinking. In Žižek’s work on ideology, we have in particular an explicit focus on what Hindess calls for, that is, “a more general investigation of the role of fictional communities in the social and political thinking of western societies.”

The approach of contemporary thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, and Žižek is helpful here for two reasons. First, it does not see subjectivity and the social order as separable or separate in the first place. Hindess laments the way attention has been paid to the constitution of the subject at the expense of understandings of community. But in a poststructuralist view the constitution of the subject entails and is inextricably linked with the constitution of a particular social or symbolic order. Neither one is prior to the other; indeed, notions of priority and separation are themselves bound up with particular modern conceptions of a sovereign subjectivity. Hindess accepts what he sees as Foucault’s claim concerning “the productivity of power in the formation of human attributes and capacities.”<sup>31</sup> But is there a preexisting, nonsocial, human subject whose *attributes* and *capacities* remain as yet unformed? Is it not the very existence of the subject as such that power relations constitute?<sup>32</sup> For Žižek, at least, as we shall see, the formation of subjectivity implicates the social, whether or not social existence is “organized” around principles such as sovereignty.

Second, for these thinkers there is not, as in some sense there appears to be for Hindess, a “real” community to be found somewhere (behind, underneath, beyond) the “fictional” communities that underpin political thought. Žižek, for example, believes what we call “social reality” has the status of a fiction but is no less real for all that. Moreover, there is nothing

behind it, concealed: The fiction conceals precisely the nothing or the lack at the heart of the social or symbolic order. Furthermore, it is not only the social, or “political community,” that has the status of a fiction but also the subject. Through Žižek’s work we are led directly to an exploration of the question of the political that does not see “the problem of political community” as one to be resolved, although the need for the fiction of political community and the fiction of the subject certainly must be examined. Žižek addresses these questions through a concern with ideology and subjectivity.

## SUBJECTIVITY AS POLITICAL

The constitution of subjectivity and the social order are intricately bound up with each other, and sovereignty plays a pivotal role in both. But I want to discuss now more specifically how subjectivity is closely related to “the political” as I have distinguished it. I also want to relate that to ideology. Later chapters return to notions of subjectivity and—in a more muted form at first, in the guise of discussions of language and discourse—to ideology.

For Žižek, the political moment can be seen as the moment of subjectivity.<sup>33</sup> We have seen how the moment of the political is a period where a new social and political order is founded, a moment that by definition takes place without the authority of any existing political system or community. It institutes that which will henceforth count as “political community,” and at the same time, as I discuss below, puts in place a narrative of its origins. At the time when the new order appears, however, its origins are completely without foundation.

The political moment, described elsewhere as a “nonfounded founding moment,” is a turning point in history, a point “when ‘something is happening’—open, undecidable.”<sup>34</sup> It is a point at which the future is far from certain, a point at which anything can happen. Later, when a new social order has been established and the events that “led up to” it incorporated into history, these events may appear as part of some general historical development. At the time, however, “far from the exposition of an underlying necessity,” what happens is that participants find themselves “confronted with responsibility, the burden of decision pressing upon [their] shoulders.”<sup>35</sup> This situation is one in which people are forced to make decisions, to “act,” in a manner for which they can find no guarantee in the social framework. That same framework is precisely missing, suspended, because it is in the process of reinvention. It is only by presuming the new social order, by “positing its presuppositions,” that the new order is brought into being, retrospectively.

Žižek refers to the October Revolution as a situation of this type, where the impassioned debates among the various protagonists—V. I.



Lenin, Leon Trotsky, the Mensheviks—demonstrate that for them, at least, the outcome was certainly not as obvious as it appears when later described as arising out of a wider historical process.<sup>36</sup> Similar accounts of the radical contingency experienced at the time in contrast to a subsequent acceptance of the narration of events in a particular way can be found in relation to the events of 1989 in Europe. However much historians may deny it, it was not obvious at the time what the outcome would be.

There was a moment of openness, a political moment, in which the absence of one social order had not yet been succeeded by the presence of another, and at that time “acts” were precisely that: “acts” in the Lacanian sense—unsupported by any foundation of legitimacy in the social order. It is at this point that subjectivity arises. In Žižek’s words: “This ‘impossible’ moment of openness constitutes the moment of *subjectivity*: ‘subject’ is a name for that unfathomable X called upon, suddenly made accountable, thrown into a position of responsibility, into the urgency of decision in such a moment of undecidability.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, moments of transition, where there is a sense of openness, of decision, are both moments of the political and moments in which subjectivity is called into play. They are also moments that constitute the social or symbolic order. Or rather, moments at which, through the presupposition of the existence of a new social system, such a system is brought into being. Not only is the new society founded, but it is produced as inevitable, authoritative, and legitimate: as if it has always already existed or been prophesied. The contingency of its origin is concealed.

At that moment, once the foundational myth of the new social or symbolic order is (re)instated, the subject as such disappears, and with it the “political”—to be replaced by “politics.” What is more, the interregnum, where there was a brief openness, is forgotten: de-scribed or un-written by the “writing” of the history of the new state. The act of the subject “succeeds by becoming invisible—by ‘positivising’ itself in a new symbolic network wherein it locates and explains itself as a result of historical process, thus reducing itself to a mere moment of the totality engendered by its own act.”<sup>38</sup> This happens when events are “read” backward or retroactively: at that point it is easy to explain “objectively” why certain forces were effective and how particular tendencies “won.” Indeed the Lacanian definition of “act” is just this: “a move that, so to speak, *defines its own conditions*; retroactively produces the grounds which justify it.”<sup>39</sup>

This is where the notion of ideology as social fantasy, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 6, comes in. Once the new symbolic order is in place, the contingencies that gave rise to it are obliterated—they disappear—and a new version of social reality is established. The role of ideology here is to conceal the illegitimate, unfounded nature of what we call social reality, what Žižek calls “social fantasy.” Ideology supports the principle of legitimacy



upon which the new state is “founded” and conceals its “impossibility.” It does this in part by defining “politics” as a subsystem of the social order and obliterating “the political”—its unfounded founding moment: “‘Politics’ as ‘subsystem,’ as a separate sphere of society, represents *within* society its own forgotten foundation, its genesis in a violent abyssal act—it represents, within the social space, what must *fall out* if this space is to constitute itself.”<sup>40</sup> Or as Žižek expresses it more provocatively, “Politics as subsystem is a metaphor of the political subject, of the Political as subject.”<sup>41</sup>

In other words, it is “politics,” viewed as one of the subsystems of all the systems that go to make up the social order, that enables us to escape or forget the lack of “the political” and the absence of the possibility of any political action. We are confined by this process to activity within the boundaries set by existing social and international orders, and our criticism is restricted to the technical arrangements that make up the “politics” within which we exist as “subjects” of the state. The political subject and the international subject, too, are safely caged and their teeth pulled.

## DEPOLITICIZATION AND TECHNOLOGIZATION

It is precisely the operation through which the political subject is tamed that I refer to as “depoliticization” and technologization. As I mentioned above, I use the two terms more or less interchangeably, though I prefer the latter since it gives a view of a more explicit, active process rather than a mere absence. I say a little about how I understand technologization and then set out how the thinkers I analyze contribute to this understanding.

In modern Western societies, “politics” is limited to the calculable, the instrumental: “Politics in the age of technology means the total domination of rational calculability and planning, the triumph of instrumental reason.”<sup>42</sup> Michael Dillon’s Heideggerian reading sees technologization as cutting off human being from its sense of self, from all that it might mean to be human: “Technology, one might therefore say, makes human being flat-footed in respect of its ethical comportment towards itself as the uncanny—both native and stranger to itself—being with others in the face of the Otherness that it is.”<sup>43</sup> International politics is a specific site where technologization occurs. International relations as a discipline “dissipates the concern with the political and substitutes, instead, a fascination with the manifold globalised and globalising technologies of order that have emerged to administer human being.”<sup>44</sup> An understanding of “the political” is not taught or researched but rather replaced by a study of “the technology of calculative order.”<sup>45</sup>

Processes of technologization or depoliticization can be seen in international politics itself, as well as in the discipline that studies it. One