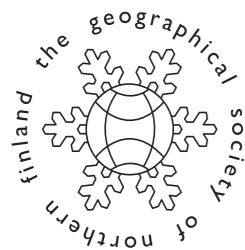




Ville Kellokumpu is a geographer interested in spatial politics. In his doctoral thesis, he examines depoliticization in the context of uneven capitalist development. His research demonstrates how depoliticization is conditioned by the material interdependence of politics with other societal spheres. The thesis scrutinizes depoliticization in the context of visionary planning, the bioeconomy, and forest industry restructuring and combines historical materialism and strategic-relational state theory in examining the spatial politics of depoliticization. In addition to studying depoliticization, Ville has been active in local politics and in the labour union. In his free time, he exercises, does leathercrafts, and hunts among other things.



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Visionary planning,
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Ville Kellokumpu



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**The spatial politics of
depoliticization: Visionary
planning, bioeconomy, and
forest capital**

Ville Kellokumpu

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Abstract

Depoliticization is a pivotal political strategy that defines the contemporary governance of core capitalist democracies. This thesis asks how depoliticization manifests itself as a political strategy in the spatial restructuring of the Finnish state space. The spatial politics of depoliticization are examined by the three thesis articles, which focus on visionary planning in urban politics, the legitimation of the forest bioeconomy in the public sphere, and Finnish forest capital's attempt to influence the state's strategic direction. These perspectives provide a holistic view of the various depoliticizing and politicizing tendencies, as well as the political and economic contradictions affecting spatial change in Finland.

The thesis examines the societal base of depoliticization by focusing on how capitalist social relations and the capitalist mode of production condition the constitution and differentiation of societal spheres. The differentiation of the economic and the political sphere and the resulting ecological dominance of "the economy" under capitalism provides a unique setting for depoliticization to appear in the form of economization. Acts of demarcation between the political and the economic spheres are based on ontological abstraction, which then faces humanity as a real and concrete product of social activity. The thesis applies strategic-relational state theory and the theories of uneven development to examine depoliticization.

Depoliticization emerges in the context of competing growth models that have a diverging conception of the spatial division of labor in Finland. Amidst urbanization, the urban growth-focused city-regionalist model posits a "winner takes all" spatial structure in which a few select urban areas compete against their global counterparts to attract capital and investment. In contrast, the bioeconomy model seeks to halt the rural decline by transforming the resource-dependent regional economies into ostensibly more sustainable production models, thereby reinvigorating a dispersed spatial structure.

Article I analyzes the depoliticization of visionary planning in the case of the Oulu City Center Vision 2040 project by observing and engaging with policy documentation, research reports, planning events, and the vision itself. Article II examines the depoliticization of the bioeconomy in the context of the 2019 parliamentary elections in Finland through a collection of newspaper articles and items between July 2018 and January 2020. Article III investigates the forest conglomerate UPM's attempt to politicize the Kaipola paper mill shutdown in August 2020 by using statistical data, the public strategies of UPM, and the online and news media around the Kaipola debate. The cultural political economy (CPE) approach developed prominently by Jessop and Sum forms the overarching methodological framework of the thesis and focuses on the dialectics of materiality and discursivity in political-economic imaginaries. The thesis applies CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis to examine the spatial politics of depoliticization.

The overall contribution of the thesis reveals how the material interdependence of the political sphere with other societal spheres and the social totality of capitalist society produces a specific place for politics that conditions its operational autonomy. The spatial politics of depoliticization are unfolded through the divergent political-economic imaginaries of state spatial development to which different capital fractions, political parties, and regional and class interests are attached. Conceptual stretching and expansive uses of depoliticization are recognized as key and very vexatious problems in the literature. To retain the analytical clarity of depoliticization, the thesis argues that depoliticization should be better grounded in the material developments of each

context, evading pan-politicism with more exclusive notions of politics, and even radically decentering politics and the political in the analyses of depoliticization. The normative critique of depoliticization should move from the level of critiquing politics to a critique of the social totality which produces a specific place for politics.

Keywords depoliticization, capitalism, societal spheres, cultural political economy, visionary planning, bioeconomy, forest industry

Tiivistelmä

Depolitisaatio on keskeinen strategia, joka määrittää nykyisten kapitalististen demokraatioiden poliittista hallintaa. Tämä väitöskirja tarkastelee depolitisaation ilmenemistä poliittisena strategiana valtion tilasuhteiden rakenteellisessa muutoksessa Suomessa. Depolitisaation tilallisia suhteita tutkitaan väitöskirjan kolmen osajulkaisun kautta. Osajulkaisut käsittelevät visionääriseen suunnitteluun kiinnittyvää talouskasvun politiikkaa, metsäbiotalouden julkisen legitimitetin rakentumista sekä metsäteollisuuden pyrkimystä vaikuttaa valtiostrategiaan. Nämä näkökulmat muodostavat kokonaiskuvan valtion tilalliseen muutokseen vaikuttavista depolitisovista ja politisoivista tendensseistä sekä poliittisista ja taloudellisista ristiriidoista.

Väitöskirja tarkastelee depolitisaation yhteiskunnallista perustaa kiinnittämällä huomion siihen, kuinka kapitalistiset yhteiskunnalliset suhteet ja kapitalistinen tuotantotapa ehdollistavat yhteiskunnallisten sfäärien rakentumista ja erottautumista. Talouden ja politiikan välinen erottelu ja kapitalistisen talouden ”ekologinen dominanssi” tuottavat otolliset olosuhteet depolitisaation ilmenemiselle taloudellistumisen muodossa. Poliitiikan ja talouden väliset rajanvedot perustuvat ontologiselle abstraktiolle ja yhteiskunnallisen toiminnan seurauksena nämä abstraktiot muodostuvat konkreettisiksi ja reaalisiksi. Väitöskirja soveltaa strategisrelationaalisen valtioteorian ja epätasaisen alueellisen kehityksen teoriaperinteitä depolitisaation tarkastelemiseen.

Depolitisaatio ilmenee kontekstissa, jossa valtion tilallista muutosta ohjaavilla kilpailevilla kasvumalleilla on eriävät tulevaisuuskuvat valtion tilallisesta työnjaosta Suomessa. Urbaaniin kasvuun keskittyvä kaupunkiregionalistinen kasvumalli korostaa ”voittaja vie kaiken” -aluerakennetta, jossa valikoidut kaupunkiseudut kilpailevat globaalilla tasolla pääoman ja investointien houkuttelussa. Vastaavasti biotalouden kasvumalli tavoittelee maaseudun kuihtumisen pysäyttämistä muuntamalla resurssi riippuvaiset aluetaloudet kohti kestävämpiä tuotantotapoja korostaen täten hajautunutta aluerakennetta.

Väitöskirjan Artikkelit I analysoi visionäärisen kaupunkisuunnittelun depolitisaatiota Oulun keskustavision 2040 -projektissa asiakirja-aineiston, tutkimusraporttien, suunnittelutapahtumien ja itse keskustavision kautta. Artikkelit II tarkastelee biotalouden depolitisaatiota vuoden 2019 eduskuntavaalien julkisessa keskustelussa käyttäen hyväksi erilaisia sanomalehtiaineistoja heinäkuun 2018 ja tammikuun 2020 välillä. Artikkelit III tutkii metsäyhtiö UPM:n yritystä politisoida Kaipolan paperitehtaan lakkauttaminen elokuussa 2020 siirtämällä vastuun lakkautuksesta hallituskoalitiolle. Artikkelin III aineistona toimivat tilastot, UPM:n julkiset strategiat sekä Kaipolan lakkauttamiseen liittyvä media-aineisto. Jessopin ja Sumin kehittämä kulttuurisen poliittisen talouden teoria sitoo yhteen väitöskirjan metodologisen lähestymistavan ja kiinnittää huomion siihen, kuinka poliittistaloudelliset imaginaarit rakentuvat materiaalisuuden ja diskursiivisuuden välisessä dialektisessa vuorovaikutuksessa. Väitöskirja soveltaa kulttuurisen poliittisen talouden inspiroimaa kriittistä diskurssianalyysia depolitisaation tilallisuuden tarkastelussa.

Väitöskirja osoittaa politiikan materiaalsen keskinäisriippuvuuden suhteen sekä muihin yhteiskunnallisiin sfääreihin että kapitalistisen yhteiskunnan kokonaisuuteen ja sen, kuinka nämä keskinäisriippuvuuden suhteet ehdollistavat poliittisen päätöksentekokyvyn itsenäisyyttä. Depolitisaation tilallisuus ja alueellisuus muotoutuvat eriävien poliittistaloudellisten imaginaarien kautta. Erilaiset yhteiskunnalliset intressiryhmät, kuten eri pääomafraktiot, poliittiset puolueet, alueelliset intressit tai luokkaintressit, kiinnittyvät näihin imaginaareihin. Depolitisaation käsitteellinen venyminen ja ekspansiivinen käyttö tunnustetaan keskeiseksi tutkimuskirjallisuutta vaivaavaksi ongelmaksi.

Väitöskirja argumentoi depolitisaation analyttisen selkeyden säilyttämisen puolesta. Jotta analyttinen selkeys voidaan säilyttää, tulisi depolitisaatio kiinnittää tiukemmin yhteiskunnan materiaalisiin kehityskulkuihin, välttää liian laavaa politiikan määritelmää sekä keskittää analyysi myös muihin yhteiskunnan osa-alueisiin politiikan sfäärin lisäksi. Depolitisaation normatiivisen kritiikin tulisi liikkua politiikan kritiikistä yhteiskunnallisen kokonaisuuden kritiikkiin, joka tunnistaa ne materiaalisen keskinäisriippuvuuden suhteet, jotka tuottavat politiikan depolitisoitumista.

Asiasanat depolitisaatio, kapitalismi, yhteiskunnalliset sfäärit, kulttuurinen poliittinen talous, visionäärinen suunnittelu, biotalous, metsäteollisuus

List of original publications

- Article I Kellokumpu V (2023) Depoliticizing urban futures: visionary planning and the politics of city-regional growth. *Regional Studies* 57(4): 617–628. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2021.1980206>
- Article II Kellokumpu V (2022) The bioeconomy, carbon sinks, and depoliticization in Finnish forest politics. *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5(3): 1164–1183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486211049322>
- Article III Kellokumpu V & Sirviö H (2022) Politics of public interest: Finnish forest capital's strategy in the Kaipola paper mill shutdown. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 104(4): 341–361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2021.2025412>

Original publications are available in the appendices of the printed version of this thesis. Articles I and III are reprinted under the CC-BY 4.0 Creative Commons Attribution license. Article II is reprinted with permission from SAGE Publishing.

Author's contributions

VK is the sole author of articles I and II. In article III, VK and HS contributed equally to developing the theoretical and concluding sections of the paper with HS especially focusing on sections 3. and 7.1. VK was responsible for writing the theoretical sections 2. and 4., the methodological approach in section 5., the empirical analysis in section 6., and the concluding section 7.2.

VK = Ville Kellokumpu

HS = Heikki Sirviö

Acknowledgments

At the end of the journey, the words escape me. Recounting the people that need and deserve to be thanked came relatively easily. Now, I find myself contemplating. The urge to write something grandiose and poetic is strong. To give an appropriate finishing touch to the years of work condensed in these pages. Acknowledgments are usually the last thing you write and to sign off this work with something derivative and procedural feels inappropriate. Yet, nothing grandiose or poetic comes to mind. Should I reflect on all the accomplishments that were made during the journey? Congratulate myself on all the academic prestige gained during the years? Or should I dwell on the miseries and failures of the journey? Neither seems quite right and to give justice to the experiences and the almost half a decade of life spent during this thesis seems like a tall task.

So, I let these brief words serve as a testament for letting go. For loosening the grip on the thing that has, for better and for worse, strongly defined my career and identity. And for embracing the feeling of the earth once again moving under your feet. The river will flow on even after we are all gone.

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Heikki Sirviö knows the effect that he has had on my academic and intellectual development. My interest in depoliticization was sparked in 2016 on one of his courses and this thesis is a testament to how those small sparks can end up being life-altering. Heikki has taught me intellectual self-honesty and what it means to be true to one's intellectual principles in the contemporary university that favors competitiveness, productivity, and academic politics over thoughtful inquiry. The picture painted hasn't always been the most positive, but it is a truthful one that has prepared me to see with clarity the pitfalls of the contemporary university.

Institutions often seem amorphous but, nevertheless, they structure our everyday life significantly. This thesis would not have been possible without the institutional setting provided by the Geography Research Unit here in Oulu. As heads of the unit Jarmo Rusanen, Jarkko Saarinen, and Jan Hjort have, during my years, been responsible for managing and sustaining this institutional setting and big thanks go to them. The intellectual environment in the Regional Development and Regional Policy -research group headed by Eeva-Kaisa Prokkola has allowed me to think about how depoliticization relates to spatial development and enabled me to elevate my research to the next level. Acting as my follow-up group, Harri Antikainen and Kaarina Tervo-Kankare have both kept me in check in terms of my progress. Thank you to both. The Geographical Society of Northern Finland has allowed me to exercise scientific editing as the editor-in-chief of Nordia Geographical Publications. This opportunity has also greatly contributed to my thesis as I have seen the editing and publication process also from the other side.

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A lot depends on the people that most closely surround you and my colleagues in the Geography Research Unit have been among the best. What people have taught me here is that science is not made alone and that behind every single-author paper, there is a group of people who have fostered, challenged, and remolded those ideas that appear as “singular achievements”. What I have also learned is that despite all the institutional incentives that push us to see each other as “competitors”, we truly depend upon each other. Most importantly the people in the Unit have shown that life inside the university is just a fraction of our lives. You have presented life in all its variety and heterogeneity. In no particular order, thank you to Alix, Hidefumi, Johanna, Fredrika, Tuomo (keep striving for the post-capital!), Jonne, Outi, Vesa, Terhi, Olli, Satu, Kaj, Marja, Helena, Sonja, Veera, Niina, Petteri, Oona, Aapo, Eirini, Adel, Mari, Anita, Primi, Henriikka, Marjo, and Maija (and sorry if I forgot someone’s name!). And special thanks go to Marika. A lot of ups and downs have been shared in the almost 5 years spent in the same office. I hope I have not driven you mad with my nonsense!

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I Introduction

Depoliticization has become a pivotal political strategy and phenomenon that defines the political governance of contemporary core capitalist democracies. The historical emergence of the capitalist mode of production redefined and rearranged social relations along new class lines. The new epoch of the Industrial Revolution was defined by the intensification of class struggle and competing worldviews between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between capital and labor. The twentieth-century revolutions in Russia and China and the anticolonial struggles after WWII divided the Cold War era globe into the “capitalist West” and the “communist East,” and the political conflict between capital and labor was transformed into a geopolitical conflict between competing power blocs. The failure of real socialism, the dissolution of the USSR, and China’s market reforms (Socialism with Chinese Characteristics) marked a momentous change from the 1990s onward. As the narrative continues, the triumph of capitalist liberal democracy marked “the end of history” and the dissolution of the conflict between capital and labor.

Politics was no longer the motive force of world-historical change, and what was left was only the “rational management of the economy” and the finetuning of the parameters of capital accumulation. Consensus-driven forms of (economized) governance set the stage for a carefully orchestrated act that mimicked the form of actual politics with minimal stakes, while the fundamental questions of how humanity arranged its social relations were bracketed off from the political sphere. Something integrally “political” had been taken out of politics, and politics had thus been made something less. The social theorists of the 1990s described this phenomenon as depoliticization, post-politics, anti-politics, and post-democracy (to name only a few of the terms used).

At its abstract core, depoliticization can be described as a process of transforming political things into non-political things. In the context of governing contemporary capitalism, depoliticization has been increasingly equated with the emergence of neoliberalism (Burnham 2001, 2014; Stahl 2021) and the “economization” of the forms of political governance. Political decision-making has been increasingly subjected to an all-encompassing economic rationality that redefines the content of politics and the boundaries of the political sphere. The space of democratic deliberation, contestation, and conflict has been reduced and suppressed (Crouch 2004; Flinders & Buller 2006; Hay 2007) if not foreclosed on (Ranci ere 2007; Mouffe 1993, 2005; Swyngedouw 2009, 2011, 2018). Anti-political sentiment has grown (Fawcett *et al.* 2017), and the democratic deficit has deepened (Lax & Phillips 2012; Norris 2011).

However, contrary to the popular narrative of the end of history, politics was never truly dead, as numerous commentators on depoliticization noted already in the early 2000s. The financial crisis of 2008 reminded us of the ever-present contradictions of the capitalist economy, while the exacerbation of the climate crisis in the 2010s has politicized new strata of people (especially young people; see Kettunen 2021) to engage with the political system. The current conjuncture sees the “revenge of politics” both in its progressive and reactionary forms. The ascendant far-right has captured much of the attention, as it has been able to politically capitalize on the brewing social discontent amidst the technocratic management of the economy and to turn this discontent into nationalist fervor.

Depoliticizing tendencies have enabled the rise and uneven unfolding of reactionary and authoritarian politics in both the capitalist core and the global periphery (Menga

2022; Zetkin Collective 2021). Rather than fundamentally challenging capitalist social relations, these reactionary and authoritarian politics have predictably provided a pressure relief valve to release brewing popular discontent toward nationalist sentiment. In countries like Turkey, Hungary, Russia, and India, the nationalist right has been able to capitalize on the depoliticization of civil society and consolidate a ruling coalition, while the states at the European core have their own domestic right-wing movements. Nevertheless, depoliticization has persisted as an effective strategy to *temporarily* manage and displace the constantly unfolding crisis tendencies of the capitalist world system. The ever-present contradictions need *fixing* to sustain the reproduction of capitalist society, and depoliticization can provide stability for various spatiotemporal (Jessop 2006) and socioecological fixes (Ekers & Prudham 2015).

As a result of these changes, the attention to analyzing the processes and strategies of depoliticization has also increased in research. There is no single specific sub-disciplinary domain from which the analysis of depoliticization emerges but many, ranging from critical political economy (e.g., Berry & Lavery 2017; Burnham 2001, 2014; Copley & Giraudo 2019; Dönmez 2019, 2021; Jessop 2014), governance (e.g., Bates *et al.* 2014; Buller *et al.* 2019; Fawcett & Marsh 2014; Fawcett *et al.* 2017; Flinders & Wood 2014; Foster *et al.* 2014; Hay 2007, 2014; Standing 2021), and environmental politics and governance (e.g., Anshelm & Haikola 2018; Hunter 2021; Takala *et al.* 2020, 2021) to name only a few. In the discipline of geography, depoliticization has been extensively discussed in the context of urban geography and politics (e.g., Beveridge & Naumann 2014; Beveridge & Featherstone 2021; Beveridge & Koch 2017a, 2017b, 2021; Davidson & Iveson 2015; Dikeç & Swyngedouw 2017; MacLeod 2011; Marcuse 2015; Mössner 2016; Swyngedouw 2017) and the spatial restructuring of the state (e.g., Deas 2014; Etherington & Jones 2018; Luukkonen & Sirviö 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020).

This thesis is situated in what I have termed the “geographies of depoliticization,” which denote the emerging research interest in the *spatial* practices and implications of depoliticization within (and beyond) the discipline of geography. Here, the thesis is positioned firmly in the context of the spatial restructuring of the Finnish state space and the spatial politics this transformation has entailed. Despite this geographical focus, the theoretical bases of the thesis draw extensively from different approaches of, for example, critical (Bonefeld 2014; Clarke 1991) and cultural political economy (Jessop 2004, 2010, 2013; Sum & Jessop 2013), Marxian social theory (Lukács 1972; Marx 1975a, 1975b, 1976; Marx & Engels 1969, 1976; Sohn-Rethel 2020; Wood 1997, 2016), and strategic-relational state theory (Jessop 1990, 2007, 2016; Poulantzas 1978, 1980) to theoretically ground depoliticization in the development of contemporary capitalism. As the object of analysis, depoliticization cuts through disciplinary boundaries, the theoretical and intellectual approach must also be able to navigate different disciplinary terrains and move in the in-between spaces left open by disciplinary differentiation. This interdisciplinary approach is necessary for properly grounding depoliticization in world history’s concrete historical, geographical, and material development.

The main research question of this thesis can be formulated and condensed as follows:

- How does depoliticization manifest itself as a political strategy in the spatial restructuring of the Finnish state space?

The thesis aims to examine depoliticization in the context of an urbanizing Finland where various political, economic, and social tendencies are remolding the rural–urban relations of the state (Ahlqvist & Sirviö 2019; Moisio & Sirviö 2021; for rural–urban and core–periphery pairing, see section 4.). At the same time, these changing spatial relations are connected to the immense challenges of ecological and climate sustainability, especially in the capitalist core defined by the “imperial mode of living” (Brand & Wissen 2021). The aspired for rapid ecological transition will affect both the state’s intra-national and supra-national spatial relations and the modes of spatial governance. Naturally, amidst these different de- and reterritorializing tendencies, the modes of political action and decision-making through which these changes are advanced become subject to depoliticizing and politicizing tendencies. Climate change politics is already becoming increasingly polarized along the pre-existing rural–urban divisions, and the plans for mitigating the climate crisis are unfolding geographically unevenly.

To properly examine the main research question of the thesis, a few other research questions emerge. I would classify each of the following as sub-questions that are subordinate to the main research question and help to explain some of the structures of contemporary depoliticization.

- What is the ontological-structural base from which depoliticization emanates?
- How should the differentiation and separation of societal spheres be taken into account in analyzing depoliticization?
- How should both the real and illusory nature of depoliticization be conceptualized?
- How can we navigate the material and discursive nature of depoliticization as a phenomenon?
- How do the prevailing capitalist social relations affect the form that depoliticization takes in contemporary society?
- How can we conceptualize the “autonomy” of politics in a hypercomplex and materially connected world?
- How can we resist conceptual stretching and the analytical dilution of the concept of depoliticization when the popularity of the concept is growing?
- How can we examine depoliticization in a situation in which numerous and often incommensurate theoretical approaches stake a claim on the concept?

Here, this synopsis section of the thesis aims to outline the theoretical-conceptual apparatus from which depoliticization is viewed and lays the groundwork for the research articles which delve into the empirical specifics of depoliticization.

The research articles included in the thesis each examine a specific case through which depoliticization is probed. The first thesis article is situated in the context of visionary urban planning in the Northern Finnish city of Oulu, and it explores how the politics of the future is one key arena for the perpetuation of depoliticization through the imaginaries of city-regional urban growth. The second thesis article investigates the politics of the forest bioeconomy in the public sphere, and how the depoliticization of forest politics is conducted through certain discursive maneuvers which attempt to frame the bioeconomy as a fix that can resolve the various developing spatial, ecological, and economic contradictions. The third thesis article examines the political role of the forest conglomerate UPM and the forest industry in the paper mill shutdown in Kaipola in August 2020, when UPM attempted to politicize the shutdown by shifting the blame for the closure to the governing coalition and its policies. Each article presents a view

of the dynamics and strategies of depoliticization and the demarcation of the political and the economic spheres in the context of developing the Finnish state's rural–urban relations. The theoretical groundwork in this synopsis section enables a holistic examination of these empirical cases and connects each article's themes to the larger research question presented above.

Thus, the articles present a view of both the rural and urban growth models, which are presented as fixes to the various spatial, ecological, and economic contradictions developing in the state space. The bioeconomy (Holmgren *et al.* 2022; Kröger & Raitio 2017; Ramcilovic-Suominen 2022) is strongly equated with the rural reinvigoration of the “left behind places” amidst deindustrialization and urbanization (Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). Many regional economies are integrally connected to the forest industry and its value chains, and the bioeconomy agenda that is advanced by the forest industry is thus equated with rural interests. Instead of reinvigoration, the actually existing bioeconomy threatens to further lock in these regions to patterns of intensified resource extraction and perpetuate their role as the resource periphery. In contrast, the urban growth model is premised on further finetuning urban economic growth while it disregards the problems of uneven urbanization and uneven development in the spatial structure of the state (Moisio & Sirviö 2021). The outlook for urban areas is supra-national (city-regional) global competition through which global capital flows can be attracted, and ostensibly immaterial economic growth can be premised on high-tech and knowledge-based economies.

From the beginning of section 2., I attempt to set out some ontological principles that guide the thesis. First, I will explain my approach to materialism and the term “material” within the thesis and present a labor-centric conception of politics. In section 2.1, I take the differentiation of societal spheres as the starting point for analyzing depoliticization (Wood 1997). At its abstract core, depoliticization denotes the process or mode of action through which political things are transformed into non-political things. For any conceptualization of depoliticization to function, one needs first to recognize the existence of politics as a distinct domain or sphere of human action and its differentiation (to some degree) from other non-political domains or spheres. I employ the systems theory perspective (Jessop 2008; Luhmann 1984, 1986, 1991) to demonstrate how developing societal complexity entails the differentiation of social subsystems and the division of labor between societal spheres. This attempt to deal with complexity produces the appearance of separated societal spheres which then face human society as a material reality.

In the following sub-section, I tease out the troubled and often muddy conceptual relations between depoliticization and post-politics. I trace the intellectual roots of post-politics to the crisis of the Marxist research program in the 1960s and 70s (Kouvelakis 2021) and the resulting post-Marxist moment when Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe appear as central figures. The critical view of post-politics stems from the inability of post-Marxist approaches to properly conceptualize the autonomy of the political sphere in a society defined by capitalist social relations and the capitalist mode of production. The crucial conceptual distinction missed by these approaches is between the operational autonomy and the material interdependence of social subsystems. In some cases, this results in a fetishization of the political, the analytical overextension of the post-political condition, and the neglect of the examination of the material connections of the political sphere to other spheres.

After my brief excursion to post-politics, I delve into the more specific differentiation of the economic and political spheres as the basis of depoliticization in contemporary

core capitalist states. Here, the analytical focus is increasingly on the “ecological dominance” (Jessop 2008: 163–169) of the economy as a societal sphere, and how the reproduction of capitalist social relations coincides with depoliticization. The emergence of “the economy” as a sphere separate from politics is premised on the reorganization of social relations and property regimes along capitalist lines, in which the economy can first function as an apolitical sphere. This reorganization is the material base from which depoliticization can be perpetuated. Of course, this is not to suggest that contemporary depoliticization operates *exclusively* through this differentiation of economic and political spheres, but that the demarcation of politics and economics is its dominant form.

The problem of the realness and illusoriness of depoliticization remains. Emphasizing depoliticization merely as a political illusion does not paint a full picture of the causal effects of depoliticization, while emphasizing its realness tends to falsely reify hard boundaries between societal spheres. In section 2.4, I employ the concepts of real abstraction and reification (Lange 2022; Lukács 1972; O’Kane 2020; Oliva *et al.* 2020; Sohn-Rethel 2020; Toscano 2008) to explain how the differentiation of societal spheres is an abstraction on which human society acts and reproduces, thus making the social force of depoliticization in this sense a reality. Treating depoliticization merely as a form of false consciousness produces a voluntaristic conception that sees the political authority of depoliticization emanating from the individual’s or group’s will to produce depoliticizing speech acts. This view disregards the social base which enables discursive depoliticization to properly function in the first place.

The role of the state is crucial, as it maps on to the public/private divisions of modern society and the demarcation between the political state and the private economy that defines capitalist states. In section 2.5, I outline the strategic-relational state theory (Etherington & Jones 2018; Jessop 2007, 2016; Poulantzas 1978, 1980) that guides the perspective of the state in this thesis and emphasizes the centrality of the notion of public interest for the strategic direction of the capitalist state. The strategic relational approach sees the state as a social relation and an uneven terrain of class struggle. As this thesis demonstrates, various non-political actors engage in this struggle through depoliticization and politicization to rearrange the state terrain and the exercise of state power.

As was mentioned earlier in this introduction, in section 3, I survey and compile some of the recent developments in the literature on depoliticization and outline in more detail the geographies of depoliticization, and in section 4, I contextualize the thesis articles within the larger contemporary changes in the development of the Finnish state space. Section 5 is dedicated to methodological considerations in which I sketch the role of cultural political economy (CPE) (e.g., Jessop 2004, 2010, 2013; Sum & Jessop 2013) as the methodological approach to depoliticization in this thesis. CPE attempts to put semiotic practices in their proper place in the reproduction of capitalist society, and it examines the constitutive role of semiosis in political and economic practice. Crucially, CPE avoids elevating the semiotic elements to a primary role and instead seeks to interrogate both material and discursive moments in political and economic practice.

After some methodological considerations, I proceed to compile the results of each of the three research articles and summarize the contributions of the articles both individually and as a whole. Article I contributes to an understanding of the role and politics of the future in the context of urban politics and visionary urban planning. Article II emphasizes the central role of depoliticization in the establishment and reproduction of particular growth models like the bioeconomy and contributes to an understanding

of the motive forces that compel societal actors to engage in depoliticization. Article III focuses on the role of the public interest in capital-state relations and argues for a more systematic inclusion of public interest in analyses of depoliticization. In section 6.4, I draw together the articles and the theoretical perspectives advanced earlier for a holistic examination of how the thesis contributes to the literature on depoliticization.

In the conclusion, I reflect on some of the pivotal perspectives this thesis presents. Some big conceptual questions remain if depoliticization is to be accurately pinned down. Much of this has to do with the fact that any conceptualization of depoliticization depends strongly on how one attempts to define the moving target that is politics and the political sphere. There are also definite limits to using depoliticization as an analytical category. Nevertheless, I attempt to formulate a definition of depoliticization based on the perspectives advanced in this thesis and argue for its analytical value in probing the phenomena of contemporary political governance, as well as for geographical research. I also argue for a scalar shift in the normative critique of depoliticization as a political phenomenon. The critique of depoliticization should not be furthered merely as a critique of politics but as a critique of the social totality which reproduces a specific place, role, and position for politics in the reproduction of prevailing social relations.

The thesis contributes to the multidisciplinary depoliticization research by exploring the societal bases of depoliticization and the broader theoretical background for grasping it analytically, while the thesis articles delve into the empirical specifics of depoliticization in the context of changing rural–urban relations in Finland. The empirical connection of the thesis articles to different growth models across the rural–urban divide fleshes out the motive forces of depoliticization in the material developments of the economy and ecology. Thus, different modes of depoliticization are not only ideological moves for exerting political power but coincide with the material changes that compel societal actors to engage in depoliticization. This focus helps sketch a holistic and properly historicized picture of depoliticization that elides the “discourse imperialism” which seems “...to imply that agents can will anything into existence in and through an appropriately articulated discourse” (Jessop 2004: 161). In Table 1., I have summarized the themes, main arguments, key concepts, and contributions of the thesis articles. As such, the thesis will hopefully be able to contribute to and guide some of the increasing interest in depoliticization and give tools for dealing with conceptual stretching and dilution. Depoliticization has become a vital perspective for analyzing the changing spatial governance of the state, and the various depoliticizing and politicizing tendencies are crucial for grasping the political and economic changes in state spaces.

Table I. Summarizing the themes, arguments, and contributions of the thesis articles

	Article I Depoliticizing urban futures: Visionary planning and the politics of city-regional growth	Article II The bioeconomy, carbon sinks, and depoliticization in Finnish forest politics	Article III Politics of public interest: Finnish forest capital's strategy in the Kaipola paper mill shutdown
Overview	Explores the depoliticization of “the politics of the future” and the constitution of city-regional growth in visionary planning	Examines the depoliticization of the forest bioeconomy and its political-economic imaginary in the context of carbon sink politics	Investigates the forest conglomerate UPM's public politicization of a paper mill closure and the attempt to discipline the governing coalition
Key concepts	Urban and city-regional growth politics, political imaginary, competitiveness, urbanization	Socioecological fix, fixed capital, forest hegemony, carbon sinks, accumulation regimes	The politics of public interest, corporate polity, the strategic-relational state, state-capital relations
Main argument	The depoliticization of visionary planning emerges through a forceful pursuit of city-regional growth and the economization of urban politics	The depoliticization of the bioeconomy is advanced through new socioecological fixes that reconfigure the forest metabolism	The politics of public interest is a key terrain of (de)politicizations and for determining the strategic direction of the state
Methodology and methods	Cultural political economy (CPE) CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis	Cultural political economy (CPE) CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis	Cultural political economy (CPE) CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis
Research material	Policy documentation and observation of the visionary planning project	Newspaper articles and items	Statistical data, public strategies of UPM, and online and news media
Contribution	Shows how depoliticization dilutes the potential of visionary planning by suppressing valuable utopian impulses	Demonstrates how depoliticization is grounded in presenting politically credible socioecological fixes	Argues for a better integration of the politics of public interest into analyses of depoliticization
Effects on the rural-urban relations and the spatial structure of the state	Posits a winner-takes-all spatial structure premised on forms of “immaterial” urban growth but neglects materiality	Bioeconomy seeks to reinvigorate regional economies by transforming production models but is subject to capture	Ideologically, the bioeconomy relies on rural renewal but has been unable to formulate a holistic vision of spatial development

2 Toward a materialist conception of depoliticization

Materialism is a central concept in the following analysis. It is therefore crucial to briefly explain what I mean by the term “material” and “materialism,” as well as the division between the material and the discursive. The basic premise of dialectical materialism is adopted as the philosophical starting point (Marx 1975b; Lukács 1978). To put it simply, matter and the material world are independent of consciousness and the mind. This can be raised as a central thesis of a materialist ontology:

This holds for the central thesis of all materialism, that being has ontological priority over consciousness. What this means ontologically is simply that there can be being without consciousness, while all the consciousness must have something existent as its presupposition or basis (Lukács 1978: 31).

A materialist conception of the world accepts that an objective reality exists independently of the consciousness of its subjects, and that the conscious transformation of the material reality requires the application of ideas in a physical form. In Marxian dialectical materialism, the mediating factor between matter and consciousness is labor. Through labor, ideas are materialized in the objective reality. Thus, a dialectical materialist philosophy designates an ontological priority to the material reproduction of the human species, i.e., labor. Humans must first be able to reproduce the material conditions that sustain their physical existence before they can “make history” (Marx 1975b: 41), and material reproduction thus becomes a necessary condition for social life (Bhaskar 1998: 45).

Following from here, when the terms “material” or “material world” are used in the thesis, they refer precisely to the objects, processes, and/or events existing or unfolding in the *concrete physical reality* that we inhabit. By contrast, the “discursive” and “semiotic” elements appear in dialectical tension with the material. The term semiotic refers to the (linguistic) sense- and meaning-making processes through which we attempt to grapple with the material world that we inhabit. The term “discursive” can be seen to significantly overlap with the semiotic. Discursivity refers to the communicative element of the sense- and meaning-making processes, i.e., to the interpersonal communication about the facts and conceptions that relate to the external reality.

It also needs to be remembered that dialectical materialism is not a form of vulgar materialism which sees the social being as fully determined by the “physical movement of matter.” The key point is the dialectical interaction *between* matter and consciousness. Through labor as the conscious form of action, humanity can transform its external surroundings. Humanity thus faces its own social activity in the form of objective facts and material artifacts.

The focus on the ontological role of labor here is also crucial for defining politics and the political. This thesis firmly rejects popular post-foundationalist (and anti-foundationalist) conceptualizations of politics and the political. In these conceptualizations, the social (and by extension the political) is seen to have an absent, or rather contingent, and constantly shifting ground (Marchart 2007: 14). There is no ultimate ground to the social but rather a constantly shifting multitude of social foundations. In this left-Heideggerian thought, these alleged contingent foundations separate the political and politics conventionally understood and give rise to political difference as a conflictual symptom of society’s absent ground (Marchart 2007: 5).

In contrast, I argue that society and politics do have an ultimate foundation. That foundation is labor, understood as the human species' conscious action of grappling with and transforming the material reality, first, to satisfy needs of subsistence and reproduction and later, other needs. Society is only possible when there is a material social surplus (in most primitive conditions food) which frees members of the human species for tasks other than one's own immediate subsistence. A social surplus gives rise to a differentiation of tasks and therefore a social structure. In this labor-centric conception of society, politics arises as the (quasi-)public management of social surplus generated by human labor beyond the immediate needs of subsistence. Only in societal conditions in which labor and its organization has thoroughly been abstracted from public consciousness and hidden behind several facades of "private" economic power can there exist a conception that society has no (material) foundation. Thus, post-foundationalism and the view around "contingent" foundations of politics are themselves symptoms of the failure to examine the historically specific mode of the organization of labor under capitalist social relations.

In this conception, labor is the foundation from which society and politics—as a specialized sphere of human activity concerned with the management of social surplus—arise. Various political theorists (e.g., Lefort 1988; Marchart 2007: 92–96; Mouffe 1993, 2005; Rancière 1998, 2007) have concerned themselves with explaining the conflictual character of political life. Schmitt's infamous notion of the friend-enemy distinction has been one focal point. At the center is the in-group/out-group distinction and the collective identity of the political community which always contains the latent potential of war against the out-group. Again, this notion of the political lacks the role of labor and matter. Insofar as the political life is characterized by conflict, this conflict is constituted in the concrete distribution of social surplus and the products of human labor. Thus, political conflict as a fact of political life is constituted by individuals or collective groups staking their claim to the social surplus and its distribution. However, conflict itself is not the defining feature of politics or the political.

A sharp critic would point out that the labor-centric conception of politics advanced here is transhistorical in the sense that it posits an unmoving essence at the center of politics. However, this criticism does not hold because labor itself and the modes of laboring are subject to historical change. What drives the historical transformation of labor is the changes in the social structure within which labor is conducted (relations of production) and the tools and abilities (forces of production) put to use in the labor process. In Marxian terminology, the relations of production refer, simply, to how labor is organized through class divisions, and the forces of production refer to the technologies and skills employed in laboring. This method of conceptualizing politics helps dispel some fetishistic tendencies toward the political and decenters it.

2.1 Political ontology, systems theory, and societal spheres

Depoliticization can be characterized as a notoriously fuzzy and intangible concept. To begin the theoretical exploration of depoliticization, one must outline a proper analytical focus to allow a concentration on the various historical conditions, political conjunctures, and intellectual lineages affecting both the development and analysis of depoliticization in capitalist polities. The theoretical threading of the needle involves recognizing that 1.) the heterogenous and divergent uses of depoliticization have

produced a rich tapestry of different analyses—with different intellectual allegiances—from which to draw and 2.) the expansion of depoliticization as a catch-all concept leads to conceptual inflation and the dilution of its analytical sharpness. Thus, the trite aphorism, “if everything is political, then nothing is” applies and can be modified to “if everything is depoliticization, then nothing is.” To resist conceptual inflation, one needs to ground the analysis of depoliticization in the prevailing historical-geographical circumstances. This also means that recognizing the conceptual limits of depoliticization becomes ever more pertinent once it is taken up as an object of study or a means of explanation.

To start the theoretical exploration of depoliticization, one must begin from the beginning. This means staking out a path from the abstract-theoretical toward the concrete-empirical. At the core lies a host of assumptions about the world and the very nature of our political reality. To explain what depoliticization is in the first place, one needs to explain the nature of politics. If there is indeed a phenomenon through which “political” things are transformed into “non-political” things, the next question naturally concerns what politics is, and what these “political” things are. This is the realm of political ontology:

Ontology relates to *being*, to what *is*, to what *exists*, to the constituent units of reality; political ontology, by extension, relates to *political being*, to what *is* politically, to what *exists politically*, and to the units that comprise political reality (Hay 2011: 3, emphasis in original).

The ontological assumptions one makes about the nature of political reality fundamentally shape what is considered depoliticization. The path that needs to be staked out invariably involves explaining what politics is.

As Hay (2011: 6) notes, the ontological assumptions we make about e.g., the nature of politics, people as political agents, the social world we inhabit, the causal relationships between ideas and material conditions, or the separation of appearance and reality further affects the epistemological and methodological choices of our study:

...ontology, epistemology, and methodology, though closely related, are irreducible. Ontology relates to the nature of the social and political world, epistemology to what we know about it, and methodology to how we might go about acquiring that knowledge.

The meta-theoretical and ontological commitments of this study fall most in line with critical realism—at this point, a sprawling school of thought (Danermark *et al.* 2019; Sayer 2000)—and more specifically, with the intersection of critical realism and Marxism (Brown *et al.* 2004; Creaven 2010; Jessop 2002, 2005). Fully fleshing out the theoretical commitments of critical realist Marxism would be a far too ambitious task. Instead, it suffices to outline the general commitment of critical realist approaches to ontological realism, which resists both the positivist and constructivist urge to reduce reality to human knowledge—either in the case of positivism by limiting reality to what is empirically observable or constructivism by viewing reality as being constructed by human knowledge or discourse (Fletcher 2017). Thus, critical realism distinguishes between the levels of the real, the actual, and the empirical (Jessop 2005: 41–45) and in addition to ontological realism, commits to epistemic relativism, judgmental rationality, and cautious ethical naturalism (Archer *et al.* 2016).

In asking the basic questions of political ontology at the very beginning of this section, a starting point for analyzing depoliticization already appeared: the transformation of “political” things (or relations) into “non-political” things. This can function as the most rudimentary definition of depoliticization from which to begin. The presupposition at the core of this definition is that there exists a realm, a sphere, or a social region called politics that is distinct from other realms, spheres, or social regions. In contradistinction to the political sphere, there are non-political spheres, for if everything were political, nothing would be, and the conceptual distinction would be redundant. Thus, the separation and differentiation of spheres in the social world can be taken as the starting point (Wood 1997).

The differentiation of spheres can be elaborated through sociological systems theory, and it can be interpreted as an inevitable outgrowth of a developing society. Developed most notoriously by Talcott Parsons (e.g., 1951, 1971, 1977) and later Niklas Luhmann (e.g., 1984, 1991, 1997), systems theory sees society through the lens of an evolutionary development in which differentiated functional subsystems develop in response to the complexity of the outside world. Each differentiated subsystem (the political system, the economic system, the media system, etc.) has its functional social logic and can, first, differentiate itself from other subsystems and second, reproduce itself through autopoiesis (Luhmann 1986)—the process whereby a system can maintain its existence through self-replication. The differentiation of social subsystems, or in this case societal spheres, is a response to outside complexity which results in more social complexity as the differentiated and autonomous subsystems interact. Each subsystem has its social logic through which it perpetuates itself: In economics, it might be profit-maximization, in politics, commanding political power, and in media, captivating public attention. Thus, the differentiation of societal spheres in systems theory is connected to the grand narrative of the development of human society in its response to the external environment it inhabits.

Systems theory gives a tentative outline for the emergence of a political subsystem, but its compatibility with Marxist social theory is debatable: Luhmann denies any kind of dominance of specific subsystems, viewing each as equally important. Luhmann also denies the primacy of class relations (Jessop 2008: 158–159), whereas Marxist social theory has always concerned itself with analyzing how a specific subsystem, the economy, rises to a dominating and primary position under the capitalist social relations and mode of production: specifically, how the logic embedded in the so-called economic sphere starts to subsume other spheres and leads to—in evolutionary and systems theoretical language—the ecological dominance of the economy because of its systemic traits like the capacity to respond to external shocks and disturbance and displace internal crises and contradictions to other subsystems (Jessop 2008: 163–169).

Thus, increasing social complexity and differentiation of spheres can be connected to the story of the development of modernity (toward postmodernity). Through Polanyi’s (1944) idea of the disembedded economy, Wood (1997: 555) traces how even the conceptual possibility of distinguishing the economy from society arises from historically specific conditions and how society is in turn subsumed by the economic logic of capitalism. Thus, departing from approaches like Luhmann’s systems theory, Wood (1997: 556) argues that the differentiation of societal spheres does not necessarily signal their increasing autonomy from each other:

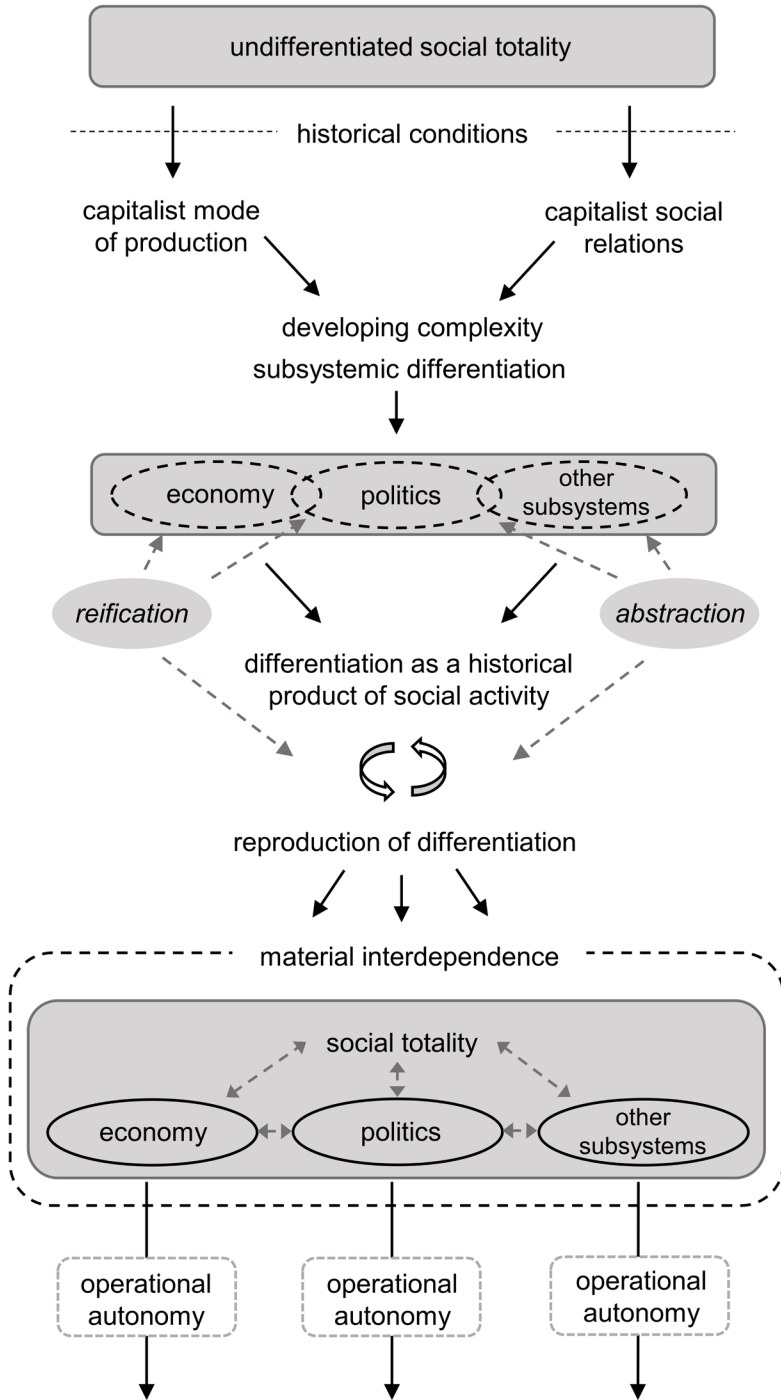
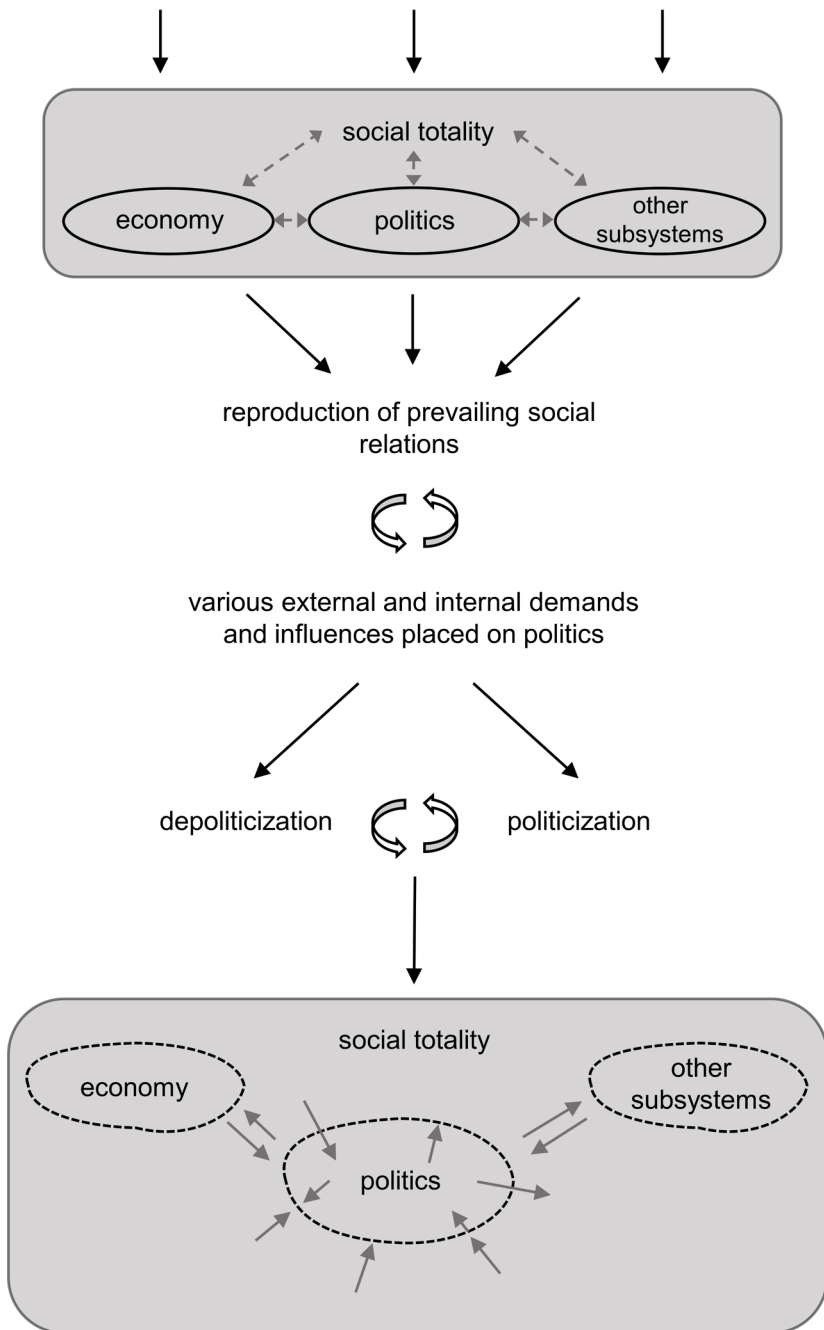


Figure 1. Tracing the differentiation of societal spheres as the societal base for depoliticization



The discourse of spheres invariably seems to suggest that separation is synonymous with autonomy. [...] But the differentiation of spheres may mean exactly the reverse: the historical conditions in which the various ‘spheres’ of society are most clearly differentiated are the very conditions in which social relations and practices in general are subordinated to the ‘economy’.

This implies that in specific historical conditions the autonomy of the political sphere—and any other sphere for that matter—can be encroached upon.

The problem with the analysis of spheres is that it tends to reify the porous boundaries between societal spheres. According to Jessop (2008: 159), Luhmann provides a categorization that might help conceptualize this bind: All functional subsystems exhibit *operational independence* and *material interdependence*. Once a subsystem reaches a stage of self-reproductive takeoff (autopoiesis), it will gain operational independence insofar as it starts to perpetuate itself through its core logic, responding only to problems defined in that subsystem’s terms and thus disregarding external demands as irrelevant noise (Jessop 2008: 160). However, this operational autonomy is constrained by material interdependence:

Nonetheless any such operational autonomy is limited by a given system’s relation to its external environment and, more specifically, by its material dependence on the performance of other systems that operate according to their own codes and programmes (Jessop 2008: 159).

Despite operational autonomy, subsystems rely on the performance and inputs of other subsystems. For example, the state is operationally autonomous from the economy but is materially dependent on its performance. Thus, there exists an ontological base to which all societal spheres or subsystems are connected through material interdependence.

In Figure 1., I have traced how depoliticization emerges from the differentiation of societal spheres. Figure 1. describes how the capitalist mode of production and capitalist social relations drive subsystemic differentiation between politics and the economy. In the following sections, this process will be elaborated.

2.2 The autonomy of the political: Problematizing post-politics

Dissecting depoliticization analytically entails the tackling of a myriad of disorganized conceptualizations between depoliticization and other closely related concepts. The largest is that of post-politics, which is often used interchangeably with depoliticization. Buller *et al.* (2019: 3–18) broadly distinguish between approaches dealing with depoliticization as a systemic condition afflicting the whole of society and depoliticization as a specific governing strategy in policymaking. They categorize the post-politics thesis and literature in the former as a systemic condition. Regrettably, the intellectual lineages and conceptual baggage of post-politics is often disregarded in favor of haphazardly mixing post-politics and depoliticization. The post-politics thesis is historically linked to the turn of post-Marxism in the 1970s and theoretically to post-foundationalist political theory. The post-Marxism most closely associated with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe reacted to the intellectual exhaustion of Marxism as a concrete political force following the New Left movement of the late 1960s, as well as

the theoretical crisis of the Marxist research program (Boucher 2021; Kouvelakis 2021). Jessop (2008: 20) provides a critical elucidation of post-Marxism's ability to analyze the changing contours of politics *vis-à-vis* the economy:

On the contrary, post-Marxism is a radically new response to 'the increasingly desperate contortions which took place around notions such as "determination in the last instance" and "relative autonomy" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: viii; Laclau 2005: 250). Even when he concedes that base-superstructure arguments have 'varying degrees of sophistication' (1990: 202), Laclau disavows them all as 'unappealing' as if this were simply a matter of taste. Laclau-Mouffe also reject the relative autonomy of the state as philosophically meaningless because autonomy is an absolute rather than a relative term (1985: 139–40). Indeed, their whole approach lacks concepts to think the articulation of the economic and the political.

Different conceptualizations of politics and ontologies of the political necessarily produce divergent criteria on what is classified as depoliticization or post-politics. In addition to Buller *et al.* (2019) above, Beveridge (2017: 592–595) categorizes the depoliticization and post-politics literature according to the three (ontological) lenses through which they view politics: 1.) statecraft and the institutions of government; 2.) political choice and contingency; and 3.) politics as the apparatus of order and consensus building versus moments of political antagonism. The statecraft approach sees depoliticization as a governance strategy of state managers to outsource political crises, but its view of politics is seen as restricted to the conventional institutional sphere of government and representative democracy, interpreted as unduly restricting (Beveridge 2017: 592; see also Flinders & Buller 2006; Burnham 2001, 2014). The choice and contingency lens sees politics—and by extension politicization/depoliticization—as being defined by the movement of issues between the arenas of fate and necessity versus deliberation and contingency. Beveridge (2017: 592) sees Hay's (2007) work as the clearest example of this strand. The third lens of politics as order versus political antagonism is most clearly associated with the post-politics thesis drawing from post-foundationalist political theory, in which politics is defined as an institutionalized "police order" (Rancière 1998, 2007) that attempts to repress the fleeting and the truly political moments of antagonism which sporadically emerge from the institutional order of governance.

The post-foundational political theory to which the post-politics thesis—through Laclau and Mouffe (1985)—is integrally connected posits that political life has no essential and defining foundation, but rather a constantly moving *contingent* foundation that is subject to change (Marchart 2007: 14). Contrary to foundationalism or anti-foundationalism, both of which seek to determine the essence of politics either by grounding it in a realm outside politics (foundationalism) or by denying any such ground exists (anti-foundationalism), post-foundationalism sees the ontological status of any foundation of politics as necessarily contingent (Marchart 2007: 14).

Therein we find one of the main topoi of a non-foundational idea of the political: its aim is to carve out the specificity of the political realm and to defend its autonomy versus other domains of the social and society at large... (Marchart 2007: 37).

Marchart (2007: 38–44) recognizes two theoretical strands that emphasize the associative and the dissociative traits of the political, seeing Hannah Arendt as the

quintessential figure of the associative trait and Carl Schmitt of the dissociative trait. Both Arendtian and Schmittian trajectories, however, share the thesis of the neutralization of the political in which the autonomy of the political is increasingly encroached upon by other life domains—the social, the economic, and technology. The increasing neutralization of the political denoting an emergence of post-politics is largely shared by post-foundationalists:

Today, in post-foundational social theory, the idea that the political is in danger of being colonized (which does not exclude the constant possibility of its return) in one or the other way is shared by most, if not all, left Heideggerians (Marchart 2007: 47).

What animates the various post-foundational theorists subscribing to the post-politics thesis is the yearning for the autonomy of the political.

The emergence of post-Marxism and its subsequent attachment to post-foundationalist political theory should be understood as a theoretical response to Louis Althusser and the crisis of Marxism in the late 1970s. The failures of actually existing socialism and the faltering of class-based explanations in the face of proliferating non-class antagonisms sets the scene for this crisis. As Kouvelakis (2021: 339) outlines, Althusser's (1971, 1977) intervention, while firmly grounded in the Marxist tradition, attempted to reveal the inherent disunities, breaks, and disruptions in the theoretical corpus of Marxism.

In contradistinction to Althusser, the post-Marxism that developed from this crisis did not seek to theoretically redeem or revise Marxist categories but instead chose to reject them wholesale (Kouvelakis 2021: 342). Thus, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985), class as a social category is unable to function as an ontological foundation for politics, instead giving way to a multitude of contingent foundations determined in the whirlwind of identities and discourses of an irreversibly fractured social world. In their view, orthodox Marxism had granted an unwarranted ontological and epistemological primacy to the working class as the revolutionary agent. Furthermore, in Laclau's and Mouffe's view, Marxism is doomed because of its desire to suture the social world by reducing it to a single unitary logic, thus repressing the radical openness of antagonistic pluralism (Kouvelakis 2021: 342–343). Indeed, any attempt at grounding politics in something outside contingent floating signifiers amounts to a subordination of the “autonomy” of the political sphere akin to post-politics.

Circling back to the quote by Jessop (2008: 20) at the beginning of this section, the post-politics thesis lacks concepts to articulate the interconnections between the economy and politics, and other societal spheres. This failure can be summed up in the inability to distinguish between *operational autonomy* and *material interdependence*. This is a crucial distinction, as the political sphere is always materially dependent on the functions and performance of other societal spheres. Thus, any yearning for a truly “autonomous political sphere” must be prefaced with the recognition of material interdependence: Politics can be operationally autonomous insofar as its decision-making structures are not wholly determined by other societal spheres, but it cannot be materially (or ontologically) independent in the sense that its functions can be severed from other spheres.

The inherent problem in the post-politics thesis (Mouffe 1993, 2005) (and by extension with *some* of its applications) is that it tends to perpetuate an unattainable normative criterion for a truly autonomous political sphere. The suppression of political antagonism and radical democratic impulses by the political elites or the colonization

of politics by economic concerns—though true—does not paint a full picture. What is omitted is that the decision-making structures of politics are operationally autonomous but shaped by their material interdependence on other societal spheres. The autonomy of the political sphere is always shaped by these material interconnections.

2.3 Differentiation of the economic and the political as the basis of depoliticization

As we outlined at the beginning of Article III, “The defining feature of the development of a distinctly capitalist polity is the economization of politics” (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 341). This is a key passage, but to recognize the ongoing colonization of politics by economics in the so-called advanced capitalist democracies, one has to first consider the question: What prompted their differentiation in the first place? If politics is increasingly economized, then politics and economics need to be seen—at least ideologically—as somehow separate spheres. This is especially pertinent in conditions where economic rationalities have permeated the governance of societal issues, and the rational management of the economy has become a central question (Eskelinen 2019; Mitchell 2008).

However, analyzing the differentiation (or even the separation) of the political and the economic spheres presents a conceptual balancing act. On an ontological level, political and economic phenomena are intertwined in ways that make their clear separation an impossibility (see section 2.1). This crucial connection was already recognized by the early political economists like Smith, Ricardo, and Mill and their critics like Marx (Sorsa 2013: 66). Nevertheless, throughout the development of capitalism, the economic and political spheres have also been—to some extent—separated, if not yet fully severed. The differentiation between the political and the economic is at the same time both real and illusory—real in the sense that the economic sphere has often been forcefully insulated from *direct* political interference and democratic accountability through law and private property rights, illusory in the sense that this insulation does not make the economy or the exercise of economic power apolitical. If the realness of this differentiation is exaggerated, one ends up reifying a hard demarcation between the political and economic spheres as if the economy were truly depoliticized. On the other hand, if the illusoriness of this differentiation is exaggerated, one ends up treating depoliticization as mere false consciousness, as if it lacked material force in the world.

For this, one needs to turn to the seminal work of Ellen Meiksins Wood (2016: 21–48) on the differentiation between the economic and the political. She examines how Marx’s initial radical insight—contrary to classical political economy—was to trace the continuities between the economic and the political by treating the economy as a set of social relations and not positing a spatial separation of power between the two. The insight was that “the ultimate secret of capitalist production is a *political* one” (Wood 2016: 21, emphasis in original). However, the *Marxisms* after Marx have tended to posit a separation of regionally enclosed spheres either through a rigid interpretation of the orthodox base-superstructure metaphor (in which superstructural elements are fully determined by the economic base) or a focus on the interactions of factors, levels, and instances (in Althusserian (1969) terms, the economy determines the rest in the last instance).

Against this backdrop, Wood (2016: 26) attempts to dissolve the sharp discontinuities of separate spheres while maintaining that the separation still indeed holds material force:

A materialist understanding of the world [...] is a historical understanding which acknowledges that the products of social activity, the forms of social interaction produced by human beings, themselves become material forces, no less than are natural givens.

Thus, society faces the differentiation of spheres and the ongoing depoliticization of the economy not as an ontological pre-given but as a product of social activity determined by the social relations of the mode of production. What makes the differentiation of the economic and political spheres in capitalism unique is that the social allocation of resources and labor happens through the mechanisms of commodity exchange (Wood 2016: 29). The differentiation of spheres is inevitably bound up with a uniquely capitalist allocation of political functions between the state and the private market in which the state assumes the role of a “separate specialized public political sphere,” while capitalist proprietors have gained the “direct control of production” (Wood 2016: 30).

Wood (2016: 29–31, emphasis added) presents how under capitalist social relations political functions are reshuffled and redistributed:

To speak of the differentiation of the economic sphere in these senses is not to suggest that the political dimension is somehow extraneous to capitalist relations of production. [...] In all these senses, despite their differentiation, the economic sphere rests firmly on the political. [...] The differentiation of the economic and the political in capitalism is, more precisely, *a differentiation of political functions themselves* and their separate allocation to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state.

Viewing the differentiation as a reorganization of political functions provides a better framework for understanding depoliticization not as somehow a true evacuation or erasure of politics—the inauguration of post-politics—but as a shifting of the arena of politics as political functions are reorganized. This apparent differentiation is a result of a long historical process of reorganizing political functions, the endpoint of which is the *appearance* of separate economic and political spheres.

Wood (2016: 36–39) traces this process to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, in which the fragmentation and the privatization of state power took place through the establishment of (absolute) private property rights and the severing of the direct producers from their means of production. This entailed a transfer of the political power of directing production to a class of private proprietors. Thus, the formation and evolution of new private property rights regimes paved the way for the reconfiguration of political functions between the class of proprietors and the state (Wood 2016: 43).

The differentiation of the economic and political spheres discussed by Wood is heavily influenced by Polanyi’s (1944, 1977: 47–56) thesis on the embedded/disembedded economy (Cangiani 2011). Polanyi saw that under capitalism, the economy became uniquely disembedded from society as the coordination of the production of goods and services was left to the blind price mechanism of the self-regulating market. The discussion on (dis)embeddedness has greatly shaped the development of economic sociology as a discipline and the New Economic Sociology through authors

like Granovetter (1985) and Swedberg (1997). Similarly with Wood, at the heart of the issue is the peculiar relationship of the economy with the rest of society under capitalist social relations.

Historically, the reorganization of political functions between the state and the then-emergent capitalist class was the centrifugal force that separated the economy and politics, thus providing the basis for new forms of depoliticization peculiar to capitalism. Indeed, this concerned the changing contours of what were seen as politicized public and depoliticized private powers. These historical changes distilled the view that politics should not infringe upon the economy.

Of course, one should keep in mind that the economic sphere remains under constant political excursions and is inevitably embedded in the political sphere. Such excursions are justified by an array of interests ranging from, for example, geopolitical and security concerns, and the facilitation and fostering of capital accumulation to state intervention in markets as a form of crisis management. The capitalist state's role in fostering accumulation through e.g., direct investment, state-owned enterprises, and landownership should be remembered. After all, the neoliberal transformation was—at its core—an advance of state power to create and foster new markets in sectors where none had existed.

Two key propositions can be extracted that help shed light on depoliticization. First, the specific modes of depoliticization under capitalism are integrally linked to the reorganization of political functions through which the public political and the ostensibly private economic spheres emerge as differentiated spheres. Second, to the extent that the economy can be truly said to have been insulated or indeed separated from politics, this separation appears precisely as a *product* of human social activity that is guided by the social relations and social logic of capitalism, not as an ontological given. Thus, the analysis of depoliticization must avoid the pitfall of presenting these different spheres of human activity as enclosed levels or instances that merely interact with each other mechanically.

In Marx's (1975b, 1976) analysis, the abstraction that the capitalist state is a thing standing apart from other societal spheres and civil society is precisely a product of the fetishism characteristic of capitalist social relations. The emergence of the capitalist state as a distinctly political sphere presupposes the depoliticization of civil society (Burnham 2014: 191)—civil society is dissolved into a collection of independent individuals engaged in market exchanges. This leads us to concepts like fetishism and abstraction which imply that society faces depoliticization as a product of its social relations come to life.

2.4 Depoliticization and real abstraction

Paradoxically, depoliticization is both real and illusory. It derives its concrete social force from the illusory abstraction of differentiated political and economic spheres. The concept of real abstraction (Sohn-Rethel [1970]2020) helps shed light on this paradox. Even in the most intense moments of depoliticization, the economic sphere is never truly devoid of politics, yet the abstraction compels societal actors to operate *as if* politics and economics were truly separate. This is not only ideological obfuscation, but rather something reproduced by institutional rule setting, societal logic, and the prevailing social relations in capitalism. Enzo Paci (1979, cited in Toscano 2008: 273) succinctly summarizes the binding force of real abstraction:

The fundamental character of capitalism [...] is revealed in the tendency to make abstract categories live as though they were concrete.

Real abstraction has a tangible societal force and effects, and it compels societal actors to operate as if economics and politics are somehow genuinely separate. Teivainen (2002: 318–319) offers the simplest elucidation of this problem:

One way to look at the construction of the economic sphere is to see it as an ideological concealment of the political reality behind it. This concealment certainly happens, but to regard the economic sphere merely as an “imposed illusion” may be misleading. If enough people act as if something called an economic sphere with an autonomous and natural logic exists, the sphere becomes in some sense real, even if socially constructed and historically specific.

This cuts at the heart of the problem, although the socially constructed nature of the phenomenon may not suffice as an explanation, and the concept of real abstraction becomes necessary.

Capitalist society is the quintessential example of a society ruled by abstractions. Sohn-Rethel’s starting point for the reconstruction of real abstraction was the practice of commodity exchange in which value as abstraction constitutes a social praxis that makes otherwise incommensurable commodities exchangeable (Lange 2022: 593; O’Kane 2022). This led Sohn-Rethel to examine how cognitive abstractions were preceded and conditioned “by the practices of real abstraction at the core of economic operations in mercantile societies”:

... that in societies where commodities are exchanged there are operations of objective abstraction which, unconscious to the subjects who perform them, determine, as general forms of social praxis, the forms of abstract thought that allow us to know such societies (Oliva *et al.* 2020: 5).

Value is an abstraction *par excellence*, as commodities with wildly different—physical, mental, practical, etc.—attributes can be measured against one another through value and traded as equivalents based on the value metric. A collection of commodities will thus appear as identical things in the act of exchange. Through this violent abstraction, the social relations of production become obfuscated: Value is reified as an attribute of the commodity itself, thus eliding the perception of value as a *social relation* (Milios 2020: 26). These abstractions ingrain a social logic into the reality of the commodity society (Harvey 1982). This social logic mystifies value and social relations, as well as the functioning of the economic sphere, presenting it as an autonomous and separate sphere whose development is dictated by natural economic laws (Bonefeld 2014: 27; see also Moore 2022: 160).

Real abstraction is crucially related to the concepts of reification and commodity fetishism and the theory of alienation in Marxism (Elbe 2020). Reification, developed most prominently by Georg Lukács (1972) in *History and Class Consciousness*, refers “to the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a ‘thing’” (Bewes 2002: 3). Reification denotes the process of misrecognition through which abstractions gain an independent “thing-like” existence and thus starts to constrain and govern human life. A prime example of this is the economy, conceived as a

totality—an aggregated abstraction of the manifold economic human interactions with nature, physical matter, and one another—to which humans react. The economy as a totality is an abstraction measured through agreed proxy indicators, which gains objective force that guides and constrains social interaction through reification. The economy is shaped into an objective “thing” independent of the social relations it comprises. As a subcategory of reification, commodity fetishism masks the socioeconomic relations behind a traded commodity by presenting relational attributes like economic value as inherent and thereby natural attributes of the commodity itself. The labor process and the social relations behind the commodity are mystified by commodity fetishism. Hartle (2017: 30) argues that reification can also be thought of as (an act of) depoliticization.

Bonefeld (2014: 27) outlines the larger societal implications of the process of reification and abstraction:

In capitalism, Marx argues, the individuals are governed by the product of their own hands and what appears thus as economic nature is in fact a socially constituted nature that belongs to definite social relations. Social reality is thus an ‘objective appearance’: the social individual vanishes in her own social world only to reappear with a price tag, by which she is governed. Yet this inversion of social subject into the economic object is her own work.

Economic abstractions as products of the social relations of commodity production gain a social force that not only redefines the discursive horizons of politics under capitalism but the concrete material reproduction of human life—the social metabolism of human existence. Abstractions start to govern individuals (Bonefeld 2014: 91). Real abstraction and reification outline the mechanism through which the illusory products of social interaction become real and shape society. Thus, real abstraction can be understood as the expression of impersonalized power in capitalist society (Toscano 2008: 277).

One can start to see how depoliticization is connected with abstraction and reification. The emergence of the economy as an autonomous sphere and its reification to a thing-like object presupposes a new allocation of political mechanisms between the market and the political state (Marx 1975a: 32). The development of the state as the political arena of society in contradistinction to a privatized economic sphere is not a transhistorical expression of the essence of the state and the economy but the definitive product of the transformation of social relations—an abstraction that faces humanity as an objective condition. Thus, the use of concepts like “illusory” or “ideological concealment” might denote a perpetuation of discursive dimensions of depoliticization and may be insufficient to explain the gravity of the anti-political predicament. By exploring the differentiation of spheres and real abstraction, the societal force of depoliticization can be revealed and not demoted to mere discursivity or false consciousness.

Thus, the ideological concealment that is depoliticization derives its societal power precisely from the real abstraction between politics and the economy. The various discursive maneuvers of depoliticization can be hoisted on this social base. Moreover, the shedding of depoliticization requires more than an ideological gestalt shift. Depoliticization reverberates from definite societal conditions, and the disruption to its operations calls for more than a postulation of “phrases against other phrases”:

... it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. [...] They forget, however, that they themselves are opposing nothing but phrases to these phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are combating solely the phrases of this world (Marx & Engels 1975b: 30).

Disruption requires more than merely seeing through depoliticized illusions and learning the true nature of a politicized reality—for that reality is not moved by phrases.

2.5 State theory and depoliticization

The state is often seen as the expression of the public's interests or the public and political organ that regulates the private and depoliticized spheres of society. Through its monopoly of violence and the monopoly of law, the state's

...socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on a given population in the name of their 'common interest' or 'general will' (Jessop 2007: 9).

Indeed, the public, common or general interest, and the notions of general will play a vital role in the reproduction of the legitimacy of the state system in a given territory. The state is not a singular actor but rather a social relation between the collection of state institutions exercising sovereign power and the mass of the governed population. Thus, the role of the state in analyzing depoliticization is crucial (Jessop 2014). First, some general principles and contours of state theory need to be outlined before connecting the relations of the state and depoliticization.

The first observation relates to the fact that the analysis mainly concerns itself with the so-called advanced core capitalist states. As such, certain limitations need to be stated. The first is historical and epochal: We are talking about the state in the context of the capitalist mode of production, and the second is more subtle, pertaining to particular state forms. Even within the capitalist mode of production, the geographical, historical, and institutional variances of different state forms need to be taken into account. For example, these differences map onto global core-periphery divides. The focus here is naturally—because of the context of the articles included in the thesis—on the dynamics of states like Finland in the core of capitalism and should not be extrapolated to be a universally valid analysis (see, for example, Das 2022: 256–294 for a detailed discussion of the state and imperialism at the global periphery).

The second observation is related to the incoherent and often contradictory nature of the capitalist state. The state cannot be conceived of as a fully coherent entity or actor. Rather, it is a collection of different fragmentary and uneven institutions pulling in different directions. These differing interests can be brought together under a shared strategic direction, but this is not a given. Likewise, sustaining institutional coherence under conditions of (economic, geopolitical, and social) duress will prove difficult, resulting in heightened competition for state power. Given these conditions, analyzing the state or the capitalist state as such presents the danger of reification and vicious abstraction, that is, treating the state as if it were a thing, a unified entity that acts or has a defined essence. Even though some common characteristics can be justifiably drawn

about capitalist states, what the capitalist state is or does is politically contingent and depends on specific historical-geographical conditions.

To analyze the relationship between depoliticization and the capitalist state, a few general principles need to be outlined. The state should above all be analyzed as a *social relation*, not as a thing or an entity. Poulantzas's (1980: 128–129, emphasis in original) oft-quoted excerpt neatly summarizes the view:

The (capitalist) State should not be regarded as an intrinsic entity: like 'capital', it is rather a *relationship of forces*, or more precisely the *material condensation of such a relationship among classes and class fractions*, such as this is expressed within the State in a necessarily specific form.

The state should therefore be defined relationally while keeping in mind that "... the state is a relationship/process expressed as things" (Das 2022: 9). Indeed, the parliament, courts, army, police, various state agencies, and state-owned enterprises, for example, are all material expressions of state power. These "things" in which the state finds its expression are a material *condensation* of the state as a social relation, that is, this relation is solidified and made concrete in these specific things.

Second, the distinct *class* character of the capitalist state is a vitally important point (emphasized by Poulantzas) that needs to be kept in mind. Insofar as any essential character of the capitalist state can be described, the reproduction of a class society is the closest contender. The class character of the state has been one of the central tenets of Marxist state theory, going back to the oft-quoted passage from Marx and Engels (1969: 110–111) in the Communist Manifesto: "The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." This suggests that the state is an institutional terrain that manages the specific interests of a certain class and is thus integrally related to the reproduction of specific class divisions in society.

Third, as we noted earlier, the capitalist state is *operationally autonomous* but *materially interdependent* (Jessop 2008). Much commotion has been dedicated in the state theory debate to the specific forms of autonomy (or non-autonomy) of the capitalist state (see, e.g., Poulantzas 1978; Kennedy 2006; Gulalp 1987; Block 1980), and whether it is structurally tied to catering to the interests of the capitalist class (Clarke 1991: 165).

The central notion around these debates has been the relative autonomy of the state, which Nicos Poulantzas (1978) formulated in *Political Power and Social Classes*. In Poulantzas's view, the functions and organs of the capitalist state are not purely defined by the economic base. The relative autonomy of the state (and the political instance) is characterized by a spatial separation between the juridico-political and economic levels (Albo & Jenson 1989: 182). However, as Gulalp (1987: 288) notes, this again tends to suggest a hard separation between the political and the economic in capitalism.

Thus, the confusion presented by relative autonomy can be complemented by specifying the *operational* and *material* levels. The capitalist state can be operationally autonomous from the interests of the capitalist class. State institutions can exercise autonomous decision-making that goes against the interests of capital and the capitalist class and even curbs the class power of capitalists. However, the performance and legitimacy of the state depends on the wider material reproduction of capitalist society. By undermining this reproduction, the state can start to undermine its base of political power. The capitalist state can be operationally separate from the economy, but it cannot be *materially* separate from the economy.

The approach adopted here falls closest in line with the strategic-relational state theory (SRA) most prominently developed by Bob Jessop (1982, 1990, 2007, 2016). The strategic-relational approach rests on the premise, elaborated by Poulantzas (1980: 128–129) above, of viewing the state as a social relation.

Instead of looking at the state as a substantial, unified thing or unitary subject, the SRA widens its focus, so as to capture not just the state apparatus but the exercise and effects of *state power* as a contingent expression of a changing balance of forces that seek to advance their respective interests inside, through, and against the state system (Jessop 2016: 54, emphasis in original).

Thus, the SRA's focus is on viewing the state as a terrain of political (and class) struggle. In the SRA, the state is by no means a neutral terrain for different political actors to contend in, but rather it is imbued with unevenness and strategic selectivity. This means political actors do not face one another as equals. The SRA shifts the focus from the state as a thing toward state power as a contingent expression of a given balance of class forces in a specific historical situation and institutional setting (Jessop 2016: 53).

Mapping the particular divisions of the state/society/economy and public/private divides of modern politics is the precursor to understanding the structural underpinnings of depoliticization (Jessop 2014). Mitchell (1991: 95) argues that the essence of modern politics is the production and reproduction of the lines of difference between state and society, politics and the economy, and the public and private.

Thus, the dialectic movements of depoliticization and politicization are intimately connected to our understanding of what constitutes a *polity* (the “spatial” sphere of politics) and its limits/borders, *politics* as the practices and activities that are oriented toward exercising or shaping state power and *policy* as the strategic direction of the state and the specific content of state intervention and non-intervention (Jessop 2014: 208–209; for conceptual distinctions of polity, politics, and policy, see Palonen 2003, 2006). Thus, what is considered political is often constituted through the lens of the exercise of state power. The state is seen as the sphere of public affairs.

Etherington and Jones (2018: 53) bring depoliticization to the front and center as a form of exercising state power:

Extending Jessop's analysis, we argue that depoliticization is an increasingly important governing strategy for exercising state power, removing the political character of decision-making by privileging certain interests in the state-making process, in turn framing politics and shaping political opportunities.

Depoliticization can be interpreted as one of the various state mechanisms of stabilizing the inherent contradictions of the political and economic spheres. Indeed, insofar as depoliticization is exercised through state power, it does not constitute a rolling back of state power but rather a rolling forward (Foster *et al.* 2014) as political issues are neutralized through the exercise of state power. Depoliticization thus concerns the boundary work of defining the limits of political power.

However, as this thesis (and especially Article III) illustrates, depoliticization cannot be reduced to the exercise of state power. The capitalist state depends materially on accumulation processes and the economic reproduction of society. Economic actors seek to sway or penetrate the state system to influence public investment decisions and

impart hegemonic visions that justify the continuous public investment or tax relief to specific sectors, industries, or firms. There is no “purely economic” circuit of capital to which economic actors only adhere, as the foundations of continuous accumulation need also to be secured politically. Capitalists not only face one another in cut-throat competition in the marketplace but also in the attempts to favorably influence the state system and redirect the social surplus the state collects (taxes) and manages (public provision) to their benefit.

Poulantzas (1980: 17, emphasis in original) explains how the circuit of capital and its accompanying relations of production are constituted in the political sphere:

Let us first recall that the space or site of the economy is that of the relations of production and exploitation, and of the extraction of surplus labour [...] Now, neither in pre-capitalist modes nor in capitalism has this space ever formed a hermetically sealed level, capable of self-reproduction and possessing its own ‘laws’ of internal functioning. *The political field of the State* (as well as the sphere of ideology) *has always, in different forms, been present in the constitution and reproduction of the relations of production.*

The ideal conditions for stable accumulation are those in which key nodes of power within the state system have been convinced of the necessity to direct public investment toward a specific accumulation regime, but also that these key capital interests bear no economic responsibilities toward the state system and are free to operate according to their private economic interests. From the perspective of state managers and from within the state system, depoliticization thus appears rather different than from the outside. From the inside, depoliticization appears as a mechanism of differing, displacing, or transferring (Allmendinger & Haughton 2015: 44) political crises in the state system to govern contradictions and neutralize possible antagonisms. From the outside, however, depoliticization can also appear a maneuver of politicization *to limit* state power and its ability to intervene in the economic sphere and *impart* an ideological vision that supports specific economic interests.

At the center of these disputes is the public interest. The partial and open-ended nature of public interest leaves room for building the strategic direction of the state and hegemonic state projects. The public interest can never fully take into account every possible particular interest:

Indeed, a key statal task is to aid the organization of spatio-temporal fixes that facilitate the deferral and displacement of contradictions, crisis-tendencies, and conflicts to the benefit of those fully included in the ‘general interest’ at the expense of those more or less excluded from it (Jessop 2009: 373).

Thus, depoliticizing and politicizing the public interest is at the core of exercising or influencing state power. As Article III demonstrates, the public interest is a strategic terrain for economic actors to advance their interests. Depoliticization therefore cannot be viewed in class-neutral terms, as it coincides with the neutralization of class antagonism and the reproduction of class hegemony.

3 The geographies of depoliticization

The academic popularity of depoliticization has greatly increased in recent years, leading to a situation in which summarizing the movements in the theoretical core of the depoliticization literature (assuming one can neatly categorize the study of depoliticization under such a title) becomes harder by the day. This is both a good and bad thing—a good thing in the sense that the wealth of diverse theoretical, methodological, and empirical approaches to depoliticization is increasing, and the potential of the concept is developed, a bad thing in the sense that—naturally, with increasing popularity—depoliticization is used as a throwaway term relying on conceptual vagueness and its multiple possible theoretical interpretations. This means it will appear rather haphazardly in different analyses only to be introduced and quickly discarded or used as an ad hoc explanation. More often than not, the phraseology of “X is depoliticized” or “through the process of Y, X becomes depoliticized” leaves open the question of depoliticized in relation to what. The fuzzy conceptualization of the political behind such statements also renders depoliticization ambiguous, leaving quite a lot of room for individual interpretation. With this increasing interest and popularity, the question of conceptual drift or inflation comes into play where multiple ambiguous interpretations start to render the concept meaningless.

Thus, attempting to bring together all the flourishing and ambiguous uses of depoliticization within one section may prove counterproductive. Instead, this section proceeds in three phases. First, I will attempt to locate what I call the core of the depoliticization literature, highlighting the studies that have explicitly concerned themselves with developing and debating the conceptual apparatus of depoliticization (mainly in the fields of political science and political theory). Second, I will outline the emerging interest in depoliticization in the field of (human) geography and draw this emerging trend together under the rubric of geographies of depoliticization. Third, I will briefly situate this thesis in relation to these constantly developing currents and summarize the contribution this thesis might bring to the table. The contribution of the thesis will be further explored in section 6.

The seminal texts that recognize depoliticization as a governing strategy of policymaking (see Buller *et al.* 2019: 3–18) are often traced to Peter Burnham’s (2001) article on New Labour, Matthew Flinders’ and Jim Buller’s (2006) “Depoliticization: Principles, Tactics and Tools,” and books such as Colin Hay’s (2007) “Why We Hate Politics.” Although the problem of depoliticization is naturally “as old as politics” (to paraphrase Rancière), one core of academic interest in depoliticization can be located here. Subsequently, the themes presented by authors like Burnham, Flinders, Buller, and Hay have been most prominently developed in special issues, for example, in *Policy & Politics* (Flinders & Wood 2014) and in books like “Anti-Politics, Depoliticization, and Governance” (Fawcett *et al.* 2017) and “Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-politics” (Buller *et al.* 2019).

This strand of the depoliticization literature can be (simplistically) divided into a first and second wave which Flinders and Wood (2014) seek to outline: The first wave of the depoliticization literature concerned itself with outlining depoliticization as a mode of statecraft especially in national economic policymaking, while the second wave sought to expand these conceptual limitations of state-centered approaches. Hay’s (2014) text in the same *Policy & Politics* special issue provides a helpful summary and a defense of the so-called “first” wave. Hay (2014: 293–294) argues that rather than constituting a “second” wave, the new conceptual developments presented in

the special issue are more modest extensions that remain indebted to the first wave. Furthermore, Hay adds that the conceptual limitations of the first wave are greatly overstated. Burnham's (2014) and Jessop's (2014) contributions have been brought up in greater detail throughout the earlier sections. The rest of the contributions deal with political participation (Fawcett & Marsh 2014), governmentality (Foster *et al.* 2014), assisted reproductive technologies (Bates *et al.* 2014), energy policy and energy security (Kuzemko 2014), and repoliticization in urban politics (Beveridge & Naumann 2014). The themes of the special issue highlight the growing interest and the expansion of different theoretical approaches to depoliticization. Matthew Wood (2016) examines the first and second generations in relation to their conceptualization of politics, seeing a narrow conceptualization of politics in the first wave and a broad conceptualization in the second wave.

The development of the second wave of the depoliticization literature is highlighted in the aforementioned edited collections by Fawcett *et al.* (2019) and Buller *et al.* (2019), the first of which focuses heavily on governance theory, and the second on a comparative approach to depoliticization strategies in the European context. What is often left lacking in these accounts are the material interdependencies of the political sphere or the political system on the capitalist economy and capitalist social relations. Thus, studies like that of Dönmez (2019; see also Dönmez 2021) highlighting the class character of depoliticization and Berry and Lavery (2017) on the stabilization of capitalist growth models through depoliticization focus on political economy and return class relations to the agenda. Berry and Lavery (2017: 246; see also Dönmez & Sutton 2016) note the irony that

...while many scholars have drawn on Burnham's definition of depoliticization, the wider 'open Marxist' theory of capitalist social relations from which this theory emerged has been largely neglected in the literature.

The lengthy exploration of societal spheres, abstraction, accumulation, and the capitalist state in the earlier sections attests to the fact that the foundational elements of depoliticization are still up for debate. Quite often in the depoliticization literature, the political sphere is assumed to be an autonomous sphere of action in which depoliticizing maneuvers appear as false impositions of necessity, forgetting the material interdependencies of the political sphere and the demands placed on it from outside. If applied consistently, this leads to a conceptualization of politics, in which the mere existence of material constraints of political action constitutes depoliticization.

Another special issue worth highlighting is edited by Beveridge and Featherstone (2021) which tackles depoliticization in relation to austerity. The special issue deals with the current conjuncture that

...poses particular challenges for a renewal of progressive left politics as the reaction against globalisation and international proliferation of (transnational) policies of austerity has seemingly fuelled reactionary and nativist sentiment (Beveridge & Featherstone 2021: 437).

Impressively, the empirical contexts of the contributions range from rural Germany to Berlin (Beveridge & Koch 2021; Förtner *et al.* 2021), Scotland (Featherstone 2021), Greece (Karaliotas 2021), Turkey (Dönmez 2021), Argentina (Habermehl 2021), and Portugal (Standing 2021). Copley and Giraud (2019) highlight an understanding of

depoliticization through political economy and point to how neoliberal state restructuring has necessitated depoliticization through the rescaling of political authority. Recently, the depoliticization literature has been developed, for example, in relation to the new classical macroeconomic theory's view of state intervention in the economy (Stahl 2021), climate politics and state intervention (Hunter 2021), policy change in agricultural and food policy (Feindt *et al.* 2021), the environmental politics of mining (Anshelm & Haikola 2018), the emergence of populism (Scott 2022), worker's cooperatives (Da Costa Vieira & Foster 2022), and feminist knowledge production (Ylöstalo 2020).

Examining the development of the depoliticization literature, one can argue that fruitful new connections have been developed between more political-science-driven approaches and those of human geography. Take, for example, the specific focus on "spatial politics" and "spatial practices" through which depoliticization is constructed in Beveridge's and Featherstone's (2021) special issue. One could even argue that an interest in a "spatialization of depoliticization" has emerged in recent years, bringing together some core themes of human geography with depoliticization. Two closely intertwined "strands" within human geography can be recognized to have developed the themes of depoliticization furthest: urban geography and regional geography focusing on the spatial development and spatial restructuring of the state. Urban geography has concentrated on the practices of depoliticization in urban politics, drawing heavy influence from the post-politics thesis of Žižek, Mouffe, and Rancière, while the spatial restructuring debate has perhaps had more affinity with viewing depoliticization through a lens of statecraft and governance. Of course, such distinctions can at best only be drawn based on general tendencies.

Nevertheless, I would posit that these two strands and the theoretical interest in depoliticization in the discipline of geography can be brought under the umbrella of what I term the geographies of depoliticization. This umbrella term denotes the interest in the study of depoliticization specifically from a spatial perspective: How are the processes and practices of depoliticization/politicization constituted in spatial politics? How are spatial practices de- or repoliticizing? How does depoliticization shape the material spatial development of places (subnational and supranational), regions, and states, as well as the discursive spaces in which spatial politics are negotiated? What can the discipline of geography bring to the table to better grasp the phenomenon of depoliticization?

In urban geography and urban studies, the thesis of the post-political or post-democratic city has been advanced and discussed quite extensively. One of the most influential proponents has been Swyngedouw (see, for example, 2009, 2011, 2017, 2018, and Dikeç & Swyngedouw 2017; Wilson & Swyngedouw 2014), while the post-politics of the city has been explored by Davidson and Iveson (2015), MacLeod (2011), Marcuse (2015), Rosol *et al.* (2017), and Mössner (2016) to name only a few. This has also sparked debates about how to best approach urban post-politics. Beveridge and Koch (2017a) argue that the post-political city thesis advanced by Swyngedouw contains problematic ontological claims about the nature of politics and the political, denies the plurality of political agency and posits an all-encompassing post-political historical condition which is an empirically dubious claim. Indeed, the result might be a "post-political trap" as Beveridge and Koch (2017a) envisage. The responses by Derickson (2017), Dikeç (2017), and Swyngedouw (2017) veer (largely) into interpretations of Rancière, but the larger questions about the approach of the post-politics of the city thesis still stand (Beveridge & Koch 2017b). In this sense, I share Beveridge' and Koch's (2017a, 2017b) suspicions of the post-politics thesis, but I am also suspicious of the specific focus on

the urban and “urbanizing the political” (Beveridge & Koch 2017b: 64). Suffice it to say that as much as this thesis engages with the question, it does so from the perspective of the functional totality of rural/urban relations constantly remade by capitalist society, meaning that neither the rural nor the urban can be bracketed off from each another. The analysis of urban development should therefore be able to holistically reflect on the changing rural/urban relations and rural development, taking into account the full spatially uneven and differentiated political economy of capitalism.

This leads to the second strand, previously recognized within the geographies of the depoliticization umbrella, which has been more concerned not specifically with the urban but with the spatial restructuring of the state as it relates to rural/urban relations and de- and repoliticizing practices, effects, and processes of that state restructuring. Both approaches engage with the contemporary problem of uneven capitalist urbanization, but rather than being fundamentally incommensurable the difference is more of a difference in emphasis as urban geography takes a sub-disciplinary focus on the urban as an object and field of study. The focus in the state spatial restructuring debate has been on issues like city-regionalism (Jonas & Moisio 2018; Moisio & Jonas 2021) and the depoliticizations related to city-regionalism (Deas 2014; Etherington & Jones 2018; Luukkonen & Sirviö 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020).

Luukkonen and Sirviö (2019) analyze the use of the city-regionalist imaginary as a dominant mode of reframing state spatial development, territorial discourses, and regional policy in Finland, which has thus far privileged the urbanization drive of the Helsinki core metropolitan region. They argue that

...the main strategy in the political production and use of city-regionalism is the politics of depoliticization, i.e. the rhetoric of objective neutrality that builds on economic reasoning and seeks to represent city-regionalist development as “geo-economically” inevitable, and not as a matter of political choice (Luukkonen & Sirviö 2019).

The economizing logic of city-regionalism within which the promotion of selected urban growth machines is thus taken up as the inevitable and non-contingent mode of territorial development constitutes a politics of depoliticization. This politics of depoliticization is aimed at the political neutralization of this imaginary and the shifting of regional development to a different arena of “non-political politics,” which glosses over the political conflicts arising from uneven city-regionalist development. Such a development also has profound implications for the territorial political community of the state and its citizen-subjects in the sense that city-regionalist discourse delimits the space of public deliberation and legitimate public issues to specifically “urban” issues concerning the economic competitiveness of selected urban locales (Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020). In turn, this influences growing regional discontent (Dijkstra *et al.* 2020; Larsson *et al.* 2021; Luukkonen *et al.* 2022; McCann 2020; Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

Similarly, Etherington and Jones (2018: 52) stress the need for a more nuanced understanding of the state in the depoliticization literature contending that the state remains a productive and central arena of politics. The strategic-relational approach they advocate focuses on the sites and exercise of state power:

In short, depoliticization can only be guaranteed through a process of “repoliticization” and an assertion of the “political” in and through the state... (Etherington & Jones 2018: 55).

Thus, de- and repoliticizations are an integral process in reshaping the contours of the state itself, not just a means of demarcation between the ostensibly public state and private non-state spheres. The spatial development of a depoliticized city-regionalism is therefore a reshaping of the state form and state power itself rather than an evacuation of the state or “destatization” (Swyngedouw 2005: 1998). Etherington and Jones (2018: 58) stress the role of hegemonic visions, also briefly mentioned in the previous section, in shaping the territorial governance of the state (see also Agnew 2020; Moisio 2020).

Emphasizing the analytical value of the state theoretical approach should not be taken to mean an exclusive focus on the institutional sphere of politics and a certain policy fetishism concerned with only the minutiae of institutional politics. Rather, one strength of the thesis is that it takes seriously the maneuvers of non-state actors (for example, the forest industry as a large capital fraction) that shape state spatial development (for forestry and depoliticization, see also a series of studies by Takala *et al.* 2019, 2020, 2021).

One of the contributions of this thesis is to focus on depoliticization in both the urban and rural contexts, concentrating on the functional totality of state spatial development in the Finnish context. This study is therefore not concerned with the urban or the rural as such but with the changing relations between the two. These changing relations are exemplified by the disconnect between city-regionalist imaginaries, knowledge-intensive capitalism’s urban growth, and the metropolitanization of the Finnish state with the imaginaries of rural development based on the new bioeconomy regime that attempts to build ostensibly more sustainable production models on the state’s natural resource base. Both models are naturally advanced in the public sphere by a slew of depoliticizations and strategic politicizations. The strength of this focus on both rural and urban stems from the fact that the studies under the umbrella of geographies of depoliticization have tended to either explicitly position themselves in the field of urban studies or take up city-regionalism as the focal point. Thus, the heavier urban focus has tended to obscure larger changes in rural–urban relations.

Analytically, the focus on the economizing logic of regional and urban development brings to the fore the key battleground between the political and the economic spheres in advanced capitalist democracies. This rearticulates the need to extend the plurality of political agents involved in the spatial transformation of the state. The main contribution of Article I focuses on the formulation of hegemonic visions in visionary urban planning, and how the production of the future and the politics of the future emerges as a key arena of depoliticization. Article II focuses on the depoliticization of the bioeconomy in the public sphere, and how the bioeconomy is advanced as a socioecological fix that seeks to fix the gap left open by the focus on urban growth. Article III focuses on the politics of public interest as a key terrain of political struggles in articulating the strategic direction of the state, and how the forest industry as a large capital fraction seeks to reshape this terrain through de- and repoliticizations.

Politically, the disconnect between the differing imaginaries of knowledge-intensive urban growth and more intensely resource-based rural reinvigoration produces a disconnect between the visions of state spatial development. In the discourse of city-regionalism, key urban nodes are viewed as hubs of high-tech development and global capital investment in which the concrete material flows and value transfers between rural and urban areas are obscured. This view immaterializes the massive urban infrastructural development that is needed to sustain high-tech and capital investment hubs. In other words, the urban tertiary sector is seen as functioning in a vacuum without the primary sector (exploitation of natural resources) and secondary

sector (manufacturing, construction, processing, etc.). For example, in the bioeconomy discourse, rural reinvigoration is driven by more resource-intensive but seemingly sustainable new production models based on increasing biomass utilization combined with innovation. The role of the urban in the bioeconomy is also obscured. Thus, both contemporary Finnish examples fail to develop a model and a vision that takes into account the functional totality of uneven geographical relations in the capitalist economy (material flows, value and capital transfers, and the integrated production networks of primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors). Both future visions obscure crucial spatial relations.

4 State spatial transformation in Finland: Contextualizing the thesis articles

The main outline of the changes in the spatial restructuring of the Finnish state was briefly touched on in the previous section, but a more fully fleshed-out contextualization of the current situation is needed. In this section, I will briefly outline in more detail the empirical phenomena, political forces, and visionary pathways of spatial development in Finland. This helps position the articles of this thesis in the larger continuum of changing rural–urban relations and the competing paradigms of spatial development. I will first outline the development of the Finnish competition state and then explore the proposed bioeconomy as a countertendency seeking to fill the vacuum left open by the problems of urbanization.

I approach this unfolding of spatial relations, both in this section and in the thesis as a whole, from the perspective of uneven (and combined) development. A staple in political and economic geography (overview, see Taylor 2008), the perspectives of uneven development take as their general premise that capitalism as a mode of production and mode of organizing society is characterized by spatially and temporally uneven processes. The accumulation of capital results in a geographically patterned development across the world system both *between* nation-states and *within* nation-states that produces spatial divisions of labor between different regions, spaces, and places. The classic works of Massey (1984), Harvey (1982, 2001), and Smith (1984) elaborate on this problem in the field of geography. However, the intellectual lineages of these theories go further back to the early twentieth century and to the Marxist conceptualizations of imperialism and capitalism in world historical development. As early as 1913, in *The Accumulation of Capital* Rosa Luxemburg (2003) presented a theory of the global expansion of capitalism through imperialism, while Leon Trotsky used the concept of uneven and combined development to analyze the peculiar conditions of the Russian Empire leading up to the 1917 revolution (Dunford & Liu 2017; Löwy 2010). Another central figure is Immanuel Wallerstein (1979, 1983, 2004), whose world-systems analysis provided the tools to analyze uneven capitalist development through the core, periphery, and semi-periphery divisions. World-system analysis stressed the need to analyze social change in relation to changes in the globally integrated world system (Flint & Taylor 2018: 13).

Wallerstein (1983), as well as geographers like Smith (1984) and Massey (1984), has argued that instead of developmental equalization and convergence, capital exploits geographical differentiation through spatial maneuvers by shifting mobile financial capital across borders from low-profit to high-profit regions. These maneuvers produce global spatiotemporal patterns of uneven development in which mobile financial capital is invested and thus transformed into fixed capital in high-profit regions, only then to be abandoned and deindustrialized as profits are exhausted over time. As Taylor (2008: 521) puts it, "...capital does not seek equilibrium, it uses uneven development to transcend its contradictions." These classical formulations of spatially uneven development from the late 1970s and 1980s have been a staple in human geographical debates (Peck *et al.* 2022), albeit with new and developed forms. Dunford and Liu (2017) and Dunford *et al.* (2021) have argued for the incorporation of the forgotten "combined" in uneven and *combined* development in geography. Recently, Alami and Dixon (2021) and Alami *et al.* (2021) have employed the concept of uneven and combined development in analyzing state capitalism and especially the geopolitical and geoeconomic role of China in the

global economy. The problem of spatially uneven development of capitalism through the core–periphery and rural–urban divides thus persists.

In this thesis, I approach the conceptual pairing of core–periphery and rural–urban from this Wallersteinian and critical geographical perspective of capitalism’s ability to produce and exploit spatial differentiation. The context of the Finnish state naturally reminds us that these spatial divisions not only exist between nation-states on the global scale but also within state spaces and in other scalar articulations. Material facts like capital and investment flows, value chains of economic activities, and the material bases of regional economies (Moisio & Sirviö 2021) attest to this, as well as discursive patterns concerning the “productive” and “parasitic” regions of the nation-state (Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020). The mode of capitalist development has also been increasingly urban and urbanized, reflected in the debates around the planetary urbanization thesis (Brenner & Schmid 2015; Buckley & Strauss 2016; Derickson 2015; Goonewardena 2018; Peake *et al.* 2018), for example. The core urban and the peripheral rural appear almost synonymous in the contemporary unfolding of uneven accumulation in the capitalist world system. While the current section contextualizes the thesis through the history and current conjuncture of the Finnish nation-state, this does not imply that the analysis engages in methodological nationalism. The background of these changes can be found in the spatially patterned development of global capitalism.

The period from the end of the Second World War to the present day can be characterized by a periodization that moves from the rationale of a spatial Keynesian and regionally integrative welfare state to a neoliberal competition state, and finally to a metropolitan state (Moisio & Leppänen 2007; Moisio 2012). The unique geopolitical and economic circumstances of Finland post-WWII provided the backdrop for a consensus that saw the integration of—hitherto loosely assimilated—peripheral regions to the central authority of the state as of utmost importance. Economically, territorial losses and war reparations compelled the need to industrialize further (for state–industry relations, see Sahari 2018), while loosely integrated peripheral regions were seen as geopolitical security threats (Moisio 2012). Political support for the socialist and communist parties was comparatively high in peripheral Northern and Eastern Finland, which the moderate political factions interpreted as a potential breeding ground for political agitation from the Soviet Union and internal national disintegration. Economic development was seen as stifling these potential fissures. A central aspect of this integration was to bring the natural resources of the peripheral regions into use. Vast forest areas were still unexploited, as was the mining potential in these areas. A significant amount of hydropower capacity was lost in the aftermath of WWII with the territories annexed by the Soviet Union, which led to a push for new dam construction in the big Northern Finnish rivers.

The “golden age” of the welfare state lasted from the 1960s to the late 1980s. Nascent neoliberalization emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, and the economic crisis of the 1990s marked a momentous shift to the political right (Patomäki 2007) as the established governing coalition between the Social Democrats and the Centre Party began to break down. Although this marked a change in the form of market liberalization, privatization, and the promotion of economic competitiveness, the new governing rationale was still unable to fully shed the legacy of spatial Keynesianism. Moisio (2012: 163–164) argues that during the 1990s and early 2000s, Finland did not fully transition to a neoliberal state (akin to the US or UK), but rather it adopted a hybrid state form in which the neoliberal market reforms and strong state regulation and

redistribution mechanisms existed side by side. This marks the period of a regionally dispersed competition state.

The story of the last two decades in Finland has largely followed the developments of the core capitalist states of Western Europe and North America. The shifting spatialities of globalization have ignited deindustrialization in the capitalist core, leading to new post-industrial economic growth models based on knowledge-intensive (Moisio 2018) and financialized capitalism (Lapavitsas 2013; Skyrman *et al.* 2022). The knowledge-based economization of the Finnish state emerged in the late 1990s, first finding itself in the spatial structure of the dispersed competition state in the form of regional innovation hubs, but increasingly finding its spatial expression in the form of the metropolitan state (Moisio 2012: 195–302). The spatial structure (Moisio & Sirviö 2021) of the dispersed competition state remains a material and political reality (Moisio 2012: 195) alongside the tendencies that drive urbanization. However, the transformation of regional economic structures and the reactive changes in regional development discourses signals a future pathway that is based on metropolitanization and the increasing economic and political role of the capital region. This pathway is presented as a political-economic necessity and a national interest, an issue of fate, and even a moral development in which the nation can shed its lingering parochial and insular legacy through structural and spatial reform.

Although lauded as a pathway to success in global economic competition, urbanization has already revealed political and economic fissures between the core and periphery. The property market has become highly differentiated between the Southern Growth Triangle (Helsinki capital region, Tampere, and Turku) and a few other growing city regions and the rest of the country. The construction boom has inflated property values and rents in the capital region (see, KTI 2022: 70–91), while conversely, the peripheral regions have seen an intense devaluing of property and resulting infrastructural decay. This exemplifies a process of (property) wealth redistribution between the core and the periphery. Moreover, as Soininvaara (2022b: 50, see also Soininvaara 2020, 2021, 2022a) explores in his dissertation,

...amidst the futuristic visions of a more urban and ecological Finland, there seems to be no concrete, shared plans on how to manage the rapid structural change. The various urbanization strategies and goals in this regard appear as partial and incomplete.

Thus, the depoliticized imaginaries of urbanization paper over the problems of rapid structural change. This leads to the aforementioned fissures in the “collective politics of the spatial structure” (Moisio & Sirviö 2021: 123–124; Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020) and the “revenge of the places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Reverberations have been seen in the regional differentiation of education policy (Kettunen & Prokkola 2021), healthcare (Kivelä 2018), the eroding public steering capacities in spatial planning (Hytönen 2019), and cross-border cooperation (Jakola 2019). This indicates that despite the futuristic visions, rhetoric of necessity, and national interest, painful political and economic questions have emerged between core and peripheral regions. The partial and incomplete strategies and goals of urbanization indicated by Soininvaara have left the door open for other political-economic strategies to attempt to solve the rural question. The bioeconomy is one such strategy.

The bioeconomy has emerged as a policy response to the rapidly developing environmental crises of the contemporary epoch, both globally (see, Birch & Tyfield

2013: 299; Kumeh *et al.* 2022; Bastos Lima 2022) and in the EU (Ramcilovic-Suominen 2022; Ramcilovic-Suominen *et al.* 2022). The vision of the bioeconomy involves a shift in the resource base of the economy in which the production of goods, services, and energy is based on the utilization of renewable biomasses. The bioeconomy is promoted as a substitute for the fossil-based economy, promising both a transition from fossil fuels and new cycles of green growth and value production based on biotechnological innovation (Birch 2017). Thus, the bioeconomy has incorporated, at least at the rhetorical level, the sustainability concerns facing industrial production, although studies have shown that at the practical level, the bioeconomy policy agenda has been largely captured by corporate interests, lobby groups, and governmental bodies seeking to continue the business-as-usual of “economic growth and the industrial use of natural resources” (Ramcilovic-Suominen *et al.* 2022: 2; see also, Kröger & Raitio 2017; Holmgren *et al.* 2022). This points to a growing concern about the ability of the bioeconomy to live up to its promise of transforming production models within biophysical limits.

Although the international policy agenda of the bioeconomy is multifaceted and connected, for example, to the utilization of renewable biomasses in agriculture (McCormick & Kautto 2013) and aquatic resources (the blue bioeconomy, Albrecht & Lukkarinen 2020), the bioeconomy in Finland has been very strongly equated with the renewal of the forest industry (Kröger & Raitio 2017). Two main reasons can be highlighted. The first is the mundane material fact that boreal forests cover more than three fourths of the total land area of Finland (LUKE 2020), representing the largest resource base for biomass exploitation. Second is the slow crisis and restructuring of the pulp- and paper-driven production model of the Finnish forest industry since the mid-2000s. Due to a structural decline in paper demand and the global financial crisis of 2008, the large forest conglomerates have shed paper production capacity, resulting in numerous paper mill closures in Finland. Pressure has increased to pivot from the pulp and paper focus to new production models, and the bioeconomy has emerged as one such possibility for renewing the forest industry (Ahlqvist & Sirviö 2019; Näyhä 2019, 2020). The financialization of the northern European forest industry, the appreciation of forest land in nominal value (Skyrman 2022), and the intensification of extraction (Kellokumpu & Säynäjäkangas 2022) has kept the industry’s profitability afloat in recent decades. The bioeconomy presents a new socioecological fix (Ekers 2015; Ekers & Prudham 2015, 2017, 2018) through which new fixed capital can be formed in biorefineries, and the forest industry can pivot from slow crisis mode to building a new growth model.

Due to the post-WWII historical legacy of regional development through industrialization, the forest industry has been vital to many peripheral regional economies, which means the question of forest industry renewal maps onto crucial rural–urban relations of the state. In addition to the transformation of production models, the bioeconomy has an intensely regional imaginary (Albrecht 2019; Albrecht *et al.* 2021). Ahlqvist and Sirviö (2019) argue that the bioeconomy has emerged as a state strategy through which the spatial tensions brought about by urbanization are governed. The pivotal discourse for the bioeconomy regime is the

...harmonious spatial division of labour that operates through an imaginary of a “regional value network” in which the entire state space becomes a unified economic entity, with balanced cores and peripheries and uniformly criss-crossing, value-adding flows between them (Ahlqvist & Sirviö 2019: 406, emphasis in original).

Despite the idealized macro-level image of the harmonious spatial division of labor, the practical translation of the bioeconomy policy agenda in the “forest periphery” to clear and implementable goals at the local and regional levels remains fraught with issues (Halonen *et al.* 2022). Bioeconomy investments are often “hyped” as a cure for deindustrializing regional towns and centers and a method through which to rebrand and recode the image of these places (Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). However, as Albrecht and Kortelainen (2020: 70) show,

...behind this expressive façade there are several other deterritorializing forces and material changes that challenge the reinvention attempts and reproduce the old expressive characteristics of an unattractive industrial town with a declining population, unemployment, outmigration and environmental problems.

Thus, multiple political fissures remain in the implementation of the bioeconomy regime.

Politically, the bioeconomy project has been heavily promoted by the Centre Party, and the regional imaginary of the bioeconomy is often equated with the party agenda, especially during the Centre Party’s premiership between 2015–2019, when the bioeconomy was promoted to a spearhead project of the governing coalition led by PM Juha Sipilä (VNK 2015). The Centre Party’s long-established connections to the forest industry and its lobby groups like MTK (the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners), as well as its rural voter base, make the political amalgamation of the bioeconomy and the party agenda seem rather unsurprising. The politics of the bioeconomy (Ahlqvist & Sirviö 2019: 408) therefore also concerns the strategic direction of the state’s spatial restructuring. Issues of forest use and forest politics have always been subjected to intense public scrutiny and debate throughout the history of the modern Finnish state, but amid developing climate crises, the question about the proper use of forest resources has gained new momentum. The debate around the climatic impacts of increased felling especially has been politicized in the public sphere. The political coalition around the forest industry attempts to maintain the image of felling as a carbon-neutral activity, while researchers have been concerned with the effects of felling on carbon sinks and climate change mitigation goals (Soimakallio *et al.* 2016).

The articles of this thesis fall within the context of these larger developments of the spatial restructuring of the Finnish state and the changing core/periphery relations. The structural tendency of capitalist urbanization is reshaping and remolding places and regions, leading to the aforementioned process of metropolitanization. However, the gaps left open by the problems of urbanization give rise to countertendencies like the bioeconomy, to which certain political actors and groups can attach themselves. Spatial development is constituted by contradictory political and economic forces.

5 Methodology, methods, and research material

5.1 Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in this thesis flows from the theoretical commitments laid out in previous sections and follows the cultural political economy (CPE) approach prominently developed by Ngai-Lin Sum and Bob Jessop (2013; see also Jessop 2004, 2010, 2013). CPE has been applied extensively in political economy (see van Heur 2010a, 2010b; Jessop & Sum 2010; Sau 2021), economic sociology (e.g., Mueller & Schmidt 2020), and in political and economic geography (e.g., Dannestam 2008; Inverardi-Ferri 2021; Jessop & Oosterlynck 2008; Jones 2008; Kallert *et al.* 2021; Miessner 2020; Ribera-Fumaz 2009; Sayer 2001). As Sum and Jessop (2013: 1) outline:

Cultural political economy (CPE) builds on our earlier work on state theory and political economy and our critical engagement with Marx's prefigurative contributions to language and discourse analysis.

The indebtedness of CPE to Marxian political economy (Jessop & Morgan 2022; Jessop & Sum 2018; Sum 2018) and especially critical realism (Fairclough *et al.* 2002) is clearly on display. The goal of CPE is not to elevate culture to a primary role in explaining political economy and societal phenomena but to interrogate the (proper) place of culture in the reproduction of capitalist society—hence the subtitle of Sum and Jessop's (2013) book *Putting Culture in its Place in Political Economy*. Thus, a structuralist account might provide the foundational elements for analyzing contemporary capitalist society, but culture and cultural meaning-making nevertheless "...must be included sooner or later to ensure the descriptive and explanatory adequacy of the analysis" (Sum & Jessop 2013: 1). CPE makes a case for the constitutive role of semiosis in economic and political activities and seeks to connect semiosis to the materialities of economics and politics (Jessop 2004).

Although a fully exhaustive account of the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical underpinnings of CPE is impossible here, some limited remarks are necessary. In CPE, semiosis refers to the sense and meaning-making process of individuals and social agents in their attempt to grasp the complexity of the world they inhabit. CPE is not concerned with theorizing or modeling complexity, but rather with exploring, "...how complexity is reduced through sense- and meaning-making (semiosis) and through limiting compossible social relations (structuration)" (Sum & Jessop 2013: 3).

Regarding semiosis, this enforced selection occurs as individuals and other social agents adopt, wittingly or not, specific entry-points and standpoints to reduce complexity and make it calculable (if only to ease muddling through) so that they can participate within it and/or describe and interpret it as disinterested observers (Sum & Jessop 2013: 3).

This means that to meaningfully function, individual and/or social agents must reduce the ontological complexity of the world by adopting mental frameworks, abstractions, imaginaries, discourses, etc. that selectively simplify the social and natural world. This process can be divided into the *apprehension* of the surrounding world (sense-making) and the *signification* of and *communication* about the world (meaning-making) (Sum &

Jessop 2013: 3–5). Thus, in addition to material causation, a social explanation must also be able to account for the causally effective role of semiosis.

CPE is explicitly concerned with interrogating the interrelations of materiality and discursivity by taking seriously both the constitutive role of semiosis in shaping social relations and the material constraints faced by social agents. This can be interpreted as a middle ground between “economic reductionism,” which converts and subordinates social action to economic calculus, and “discourse imperialism,” which privileges discourse as the primary process that actively shapes the world.

...[CPE] eschews reductionist approaches to economic analysis. But it also stresses the materiality of social relations and highlights the constraints in processes that operate “behind the backs” of the relevant agents. It is especially concerned with the structural properties and dynamics that result from such material interactions. It thereby escapes both the sociological imperialism of pure social constructionism and the voluntarist vacuity of certain lines of discourse analysis, which seem to imply that agents can will anything into existence in and through an appropriately articulated discourse (Jessop 2004: 161).

Any methodological approach needs to be able to deal with these interrelations.

Translating the implications of CPE for the study of capitalist economy and politics may mean that the processes of capital accumulation cannot be exhaustively analyzed through formal economic calculus. The actions and decisions of economic agents are semiotically mediated and complexity-reducing, thus, focusing on specific objects of intervention:

The totality of economic activities is so unstructured and complex that it cannot be an object of calculation, management, governance, or guidance. Instead such practices are always oriented to subsets of economic relations (economic systems or subsystems) that have been discursively and, perhaps, organizationally and institutionally fixed as objects of intervention (Jessop 2004: 162).

The political regulation of the economy cannot focus on the economy as a totality because of its ontological complexity but is instead conducted by discursively limiting or specifying these objects of political intervention (Sum & Jessop 2022). For example, the actions and functions of the capitalist state or individual economic agents cannot fully be reduced to profitability calculus, value theory, or formal economic logic because these cannot be exhaustively modeled. Instead, the focus is selectively on a specific object, subsystem, or subset of parameters that attempt to reduce social complexity to a “governable” level (Jessop & Oosterlynck 2008). Political power also resides in the shadow of complexity reduction, and the ability to decide which objects, subsystems, parameters, etc. are deemed worthy of intervention.

Criticisms of CPE have largely revolved around its perceived methodological culturalism versus economism. Van Heur (2010a, 2010b) posits that despite CPE’s attempt to productively straddle the structure/agency and culturalism/economism divides, it still falls into the so-called trap economism where the “root stratum” of explanation are macro-level concepts of “capital” and “the state.” In contrast with van Heur, Staricco (2017) inverts this proposition and argues that CPE’s ontological cultural turn exposes it to certain culturalist risks. By affording an ontologically foundational role to semiosis in constituting social relations, it “...underestimates the objective nature of

social relations” (Staricco 2017: 334). Jessop and Sum (2010: 448–449) respond to van Heur’s criticism by attempting to expose its fundamental epistemic fallacies. In response to Staricco, Jessop and Sum (2017) emphasize that the ontologically foundational role of semiosis does not imply a reduction of material reality into semiosis, and that affording a foundational role to semiosis does not imply an ontological ordering of semiosis and material reality. Sau (2021) also offers a defense of CPE in response to van Heur’s critique but also posits a problem of interest formation in CPE concerning objective interests versus discursively articulated interests.

How does this methodological approach relate to depoliticization? Depoliticization can be positioned in this framework *as one of the manifold complexity-reducing methods* of political governance through which the political playing field is orchestrated toward specific objects of intervention (or non-intervention). Strategic selectivity (see Jones 1997) can be exercised through depoliticization and politicization by shedding light on specific frameworks, imaginaries, discourses, or objects. Jessop (2013: 234) outlines this process but uses “sedimentation” as a synonym for depoliticization:

A significant feature of CPE regarding this ‘third way’ [between structuralism and constructivism] is the distinction between the sedimentation and re-politicization of discourses. [...] These processes are contingent aspects of all social relations, with sedimentation giving rise to the appearance of their structural fixity and re-politicization in turn suggesting their socially arbitrary nature.

Depoliticization is therefore one process or method of imposing structural fixity (although always temporary and incomplete) on reality to then be able to politically act on it. In contrast, repoliticization is a process or method that reveals the arbitrary nature of this complexity-reducing imposition to perhaps present a different imposition.

This thesis adopts a CPE-inspired methodology by focusing on the constitutive role of depoliticization in the construction and reproduction of political-economic imaginaries that shape the spatial development of the Finnish state. Both the city-regionalist and bioeconomy-based growth models present their respective complexity-reducing imaginaries through which the contradictions brewing in the Finnish state space can be made governable. Both have their specific objects and spatially selective places of political intervention. Urban growth models focus especially on attuning the urban space (object) in the functional core of the city-region (place) to the demands of global capital flows, financialization, and knowledge and service economies. In contrast, the bioeconomy focuses on transforming industrial production (object) in resource-reliant peripheries and deindustrialized small towns (places). Both are perpetuated in the political sphere through a host of depoliticizations and politicizations. The methodological focus in the articles is therefore on the discursive and semiotic constitution of these imaginaries and their inextricable connection to the material developments affecting the state space. Article III proposes that the methodological focus on the political struggles around public interest could provide a new avenue for analyzing these competing political-economic imaginaries.

5.2 Methods

The overarching choice of method in this thesis is CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013; Jessop 2010; Sum & Jessop 2013: 124–127). This form of

critical discourse analysis views social reality as conceptually mediated, meaning that political practices of representation, abstraction, discourse, and interpretation causally affect social reality (Fairclough 2013: 178; Fairclough & Graham 2002). The relationships between the material and semiotic elements of social reality are reflexive and dialectical (Fairclough 2001), meaning that both have causal effects on one another, and that neither can be severed from one another and analyzed in isolation. CPE-inspired critical discourse analysis thus focuses on interrogating the objects of social analysis through the interactions and interrelations of material and semiotic elements.

This emphasis is crucial, as cultural political economy and critical discourse analysis-driven approaches have sought to distinguish themselves from post-structuralist discourse analysis (see Fairclough 2013: 181–185). Fairclough (2013: 181) articulates the differing conceptualization of discourse between the two approaches as follows:

For PDA, ‘language, actions and objects are intertwined’ in a discourse; the ‘scope of discourse theory’ is extended ‘beyond the analysis of “text and talk in contexts” to social actions and political practices, so that all objects and social practices are objects and practices of discourse’ (Howarth and Griggs 2012, p. 308). For CDA (and CPE), by contrast, a discourse is just the language, or semiotic, element. CDA is like PDA (and CPE) concerned with articulations of language, actions and objects, but it sees them as articulated in ‘practices’: it uses ‘practices’ broadly in the way that PDA uses ‘discourses.’

Furthermore, Fairclough (2013: 181) stresses that the movement of material phenomena and the movement of discourse and meaning can happen separately, a view often lost in PDA.

To reiterate the difference, a discursive analysis should not become a self-referential loop in which the explanation of social phenomena begins and ends at the level of discourse, and vague discursive change becomes the focal point of analysis, thus neglecting the interaction between the material and semiotic elements. This is often the pitfall of heavily discourse-focused approaches in which analysis is unable to break free from the discursive realm. Thus, the discursive analysis conducted within the framework of CPE should be complemented with the interrogation of the material forces affecting the object of study. Otherwise, analysis and explanation remain asymmetrical.

Another crucial problem in many forms of discourse analysis is that they tend to implicitly assume that discourses *actively* shape the social reality (and by extension the material world). For me, this is an unfounded assumption. Discourses may have the *latent potential* to actively shape social reality, but one cannot assume that this potential is always concretely realized in all circumstances. Furthermore, this privileges a causal chain that flows unidirectionally from semiotics to the material world rather than examining their causal interaction dialectically. For any analysis committed to any kind of philosophical materialism, this omission may prove a major oversight.

Here I would make a bold claim that also allows plenty of room for objection and critique. Contrary to actively shaping social reality, most political discourses or discursive formations are actually reactive and opportunistic—reactive in the sense that discursive changes occur *in reaction* to unplanned material changes or events in the social and natural world, and opportunistic in the sense that discursive changes emerge as *post-hoc rationalizations* of these unplanned material changes or events. Thus, discourse analyses that implicitly assume that discourse actively shapes the world also implicitly posit that political agents are “one step ahead” of the material world, always molding

and remaking discourses to better shape the material world to conform to the interests of the said political agents. I would argue that this view should be turned on its head. Rather, the far more common occurrence is that political agents are actually “one step back” from the material world, always needing to react and adjust their discourses to the unfolding of world history. Discourses and discursive formations shape the material world reactively rather than actively, meaning that political agents may have the intention but not the ability to fully shape social reality, leaving them to reactively respond to the unintended consequences of their actions or the unplanned whirlwind of the material world.

Sum and Jessop (2013: 129–134) trace some of these problems to the post-Marxist conceptualizations of discourse, especially by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). The key issue here is the theoretical expansion of the notion of “discourse” to encompass all social practices as discursive practices and conflating the social with the discursive (Laclau 1980: 87). As Sum and Jessop (2013: 131–132) note, discourse therefore becomes a self-referential loop:

At stake here is the relation between signifiers and signified, which, on Laclau and Mouffe’s account, occurs entirely within discourse and has no outside referent. Indeed, having claimed that all social practices are discursive practices, they then ignore their extra-discoursal aspects. They conclude that an adequate social explanation must refer to signifying relations rather to any type of physical or material causality.

Although Laclau’s and Mouffe’s framework is presented as post-foundationalist and anti-essentialist, it still makes a foundational and essentializing claim by reducing

...the social to politics such that every social space is either actually politically contested or, although ‘sedimented’ (i.e. stabilized, naturalized), can be repoliticized [...] This goes beyond a claim about the primacy of the political (which depends on the existence of extra-political regions or spheres) to dissolve any ontological distinction between the political and other fields on the grounds that such differences are constituted semantically and their boundaries are inherently unstable (Sum & Jessop 2013: 132).

This dissolution of ontological distinctions between the political and other societal spheres and the conceptual expansion of discourse leads to a methodological neglect of the material forces that affect the object of analysis. CPE-inspired discourse analysis thus provides a middle-ground method for parsing the conceptually mediated social reality by more firmly connecting it to the material world.

The role of political and economic imaginaries is crucial for a CPE-inspired discourse analysis (Davoudi *et al.* 2018; Jessop 2010: 344–346; Luukkonen & Sirviö 2019; Sirviö & Luukkonen 2020). Jessop (2010: 344) defines imaginaries as follows, raising the economic example of the knowledge-based economy:

Imaginaries are semiotic systems that frame individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or inform collective calculation about that world. [...] Viewed in these terms, an economic imaginary is a semiotic system that gives meaning and shape to the ‘economic’ field. The ‘knowledge-based economy’, for example, can be read as a distinctive semiotic order that (re-)articulates various genres, discourses, and styles around a novel economic strategy, state project, and

hegemonic vision and that affects diverse institutional orders and the lifeworld.

Thus, imaginaries are semiotic systems of interpretation and meaning-making that produce a semiotic order through which the ontological complexity of social reality is reduced into a meaningful, actionable, and more structurally coherent totality (Jessop & Oosterlynck 2008: 1156–1159). Discourses are subordinate to imaginaries and are just one method of reproducing imaginaries. Political and economic imaginaries are always selective because of the need to reduce complexity. By nature, they cannot fully take into account the totality of social reality but instead need to exclude crucial elements, leading to internal incoherence or unpredictable outcomes that materialize because of these selective omissions.

5.3 Research material and empirical analysis

The data collection process of the thesis followed a modular approach in which the research material was collected on a case-by-case basis, and each article had its corresponding research material package. Instead of conducting a single sweeping thematic collection of data that would then be split between several papers, the approach employed here followed a design in which the research material was collected for each article separately. The strengths of this approach were threefold: 1.) The article and its empirical research material functioned better as a self-contained whole; 2.) the empirical research material of each article better complemented the argumentative core of each article; and 3.) the approach allowed lessons to be learned from the data collection mistakes for the next article. This approach also has its weaknesses. It could be critically argued that there was a contextual disconnectedness between the articles' empirical research materials.

The research material in Article I consisted of a set of policy documentation and concomitant participant observation of the Oulu City Center Vision 2040 project.

For CCV2040, the policy documentation consists of a wide array of research reports ranging from housing and land use to megatrends (AMAL, 2016; DEMOS, 2016; MALI, 2001; SITO, 2016; WSP, 2016a, 2016b), documentation of public participation events (TPT, 2016a, 2016b; TS, 2016), online questionnaires (MSOK, 2017; UOK, 2016), city council transcripts (OUKA, 2015, 2017), and the final visionary documents (CCV2040; CCVD2040) (Kellokumpu 2023: 620).

In Article II, the empirical research material included a collection of newspaper articles and items published between July 30, 2018, and January 8, 2020, that dealt with the issue of carbon sinks, the bioeconomy, and the forest industry (Kellokumpu 2022: 1173). The period encompassed the lead-up to the 2019 Finnish parliamentary elections, the election season, and the resulting coalition negotiations. In total, 80 newspaper articles and items from 24 different newspaper outlets were included for the empirical analysis. These outlets consisted of national (e.g., *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, *Helsingin Sanomat*) and regional newspapers (e.g., *Kaleva*, *Kainuun Sanomat*, *Keskisuomalainen*, *Lapin Kansa*).

In Article III, the case of the forest conglomerate UPM's Kaipola paper mill shutdown in August 2020 was the focus of the paper (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022). The empirical research material was comprised of statistical data, the public strategies of UPM, and

the online and news media around the Kaipola debate. In the first phase of analysis, we analyzed key statistical data related to paper production in Finland and supported this with previous research to demonstrate the economic and political situation of the forest industry. In the second phase, we examined key UPM strategic documents (e.g. shareholder reports and Biofore strategy) to see how the forest conglomerate itself has responded to market developments. In the third phase, we scrutinized UPM's public statements (especially CEO Pesonen's open letter to the government) on the paper mill shutdown and the subsequent media debate around the closure.

The modes of analyzing the empirical research material were conditioned by the methodological choices and commitments of the thesis. A specific focus was placed on the interaction of material and semiotic elements, on how discourses conceptualized changes in the material world, and how imaginaries that reduced complexity also missed crucial material changes. I will briefly outline how the empirical analysis was conducted in each article, and how the process was affected by the methodological choices.

In Article I, the research material was compiled and categorized into the political, geopolitical, and economic elements that constituted the imaginary of the Oulu City Center Vision 2040. I recognized axiomatic political, geopolitical, and economic principles that made the CCV2040 internally coherent and categorized these according to their depoliticizing effects (Kellokumpu 2023: 624). Thus, the coding scheme that guided the analysis focused on how the CCV2040 first made sense of the material processes that affected urban development, and how the imaginary reduced complexity to produce a politically coherent response to these perceived material processes.

The empirical material in Article II was collected using relevant keywords in Finnish such as "harvesting," "carbon sink," "forest(s)," and "forest industry" in the databases of archived newspapers. Duplicates were removed (Kellokumpu 2022: 1173), and the data were categorized thematically into ecological, economic, and political aspects. Within these thematic aspects, the data were coded so that the central material contradiction and its accompanying discursive fix were made visible in each theme. I recognized three central material contradictions (carbon neutrality of felling, the declining profitability of the pulp and paper industry, and rural decline) that the forest bioeconomy attempted to fix and identified three key discourses that sought to present the bioeconomy as a politically credible (socioecological) fix.

In Article III, the empirical material was collected in two packages. First, key statistical figures were collected from Statistics Finland and Finnish Forest Industries Federation to provide a background for the economic position of the forest industry in Finland, and publicly available strategies and documents of UPM were compiled to assess the company's strategic direction. Second, public statements by key actors and media items that referenced the Kaipola shutdown were collected and coded on how these key actors discursively negotiated the reasons for the shutdown. Emanating from the methodological commitment of CPE, we contrasted the discursive maneuvers of key actors in the Kaipola debate with the background of the material developments and strategies in the forest industry and recognized a disconnect between them.

Thus, the methodological commitments of the thesis focused the analysis of the research material on the dialectic movement between discursivity and materiality. In practice, this meant the thematic categorization and coding focused on how the key actors interpreted material developments, and how they discursively presented a complexity-reducing response to these. The empirical research material in the articles presents a contextually rich approach to the study of depoliticization, ranging from urban planning to national debates on the bioeconomy and the structural

transformation of the forest industry. The material also presents an opportunity to bridge the contextual gap between the rural and the urban, both of which are often divided (perhaps unproductively) into distinct fields of study. This gives a glimpse at more integrated geographies of depoliticization that combine the crucial issues debated in urban geography and urban studies, state spatial restructuring, and political theory to develop a more holistic approach to the study of depoliticization.

6 Results

6.1 Article I: Visionary planning

Article I analyzed the “Oulu City Center Vision 2040” visionary planning project of the city of Oulu, focusing on the role of “hegemonic visions” (Jessop 2016: 86–88) in future-oriented governance. The article’s premise was that visionary planning was a central terrain of political struggles and a technique of rendering the future governable. In this section, I will highlight the results of each thesis article first separately and then holistically by drawing the contributions together. The aim is not to reiterate what has already been said in the articles but to highlight the key results and then develop these points further where the limited space of an article manuscript did not allow it.

CCV2040 is a response to global urbanization and the need for peripheral regional cities like Oulu to reposition themselves in global city-regional competition. Of course, the larger material impetus behind this repositioning is the uneven spatial development of capitalism and the changing modes of economic development in the capitalist core toward a knowledge-based economy. These changes compel city-regional actors to engage in forms of visionary planning and future-oriented governance to anticipate changes and render the future actionable. The city-regional model of urban growth provides a pre-existing semiotic system—a political-economic imaginary—to first make sense of uneven urbanization and then respond to it appropriately. A focus is placed on the development of the city region’s functional core as the economic *primus motor*, the prime mover on which the success of the city region hinges. The fundamental concern of visionary planning is therefore with attuning the urban space to foster competitiveness, flexibility, and valorization. This aim resembles an attempt to create a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. By setting the future within parameters that cultivate “a stable and predictable market environment” and “generate expectations of future value creation” (Kellokumpu 2023: 625), visionary planning creates (economic) forecasts which seek to fulfill the prophecy of a successful city region.

To support this vision, city governance and the politics of the city need—to a certain extent—to be depoliticized in the sense that potential antagonisms and fissures lie dormant. Visionary planning exercises present a great opportunity to shift the temporalities of urban politics from the usual 4-year election cycle period to a far longer period of 20–30 years. Although not legally binding, visionary planning presents an opportunity to commit future city councils to a shared vision beyond the particular skirmishes of one election cycle. Thus, political conflict is seen to have the latent potential to destabilize the favorable conditions for urban growth. Visionary planning can then be interpreted as a mode to regulate the (perceived) inherent long-term unpredictability of the political sphere by shifting these aforementioned temporalities of politics. Contingency and contestation in the political subsystem are seen to collide with the proper functioning of other subsystems—especially the economy—resulting in suboptimal performance. Depoliticization emerges as a method of regulating the operational autonomy of politics so that the optimal performance of the economy is ensured.

Article I builds on the (urban) geographies of depoliticization by adding the new layer of visionary planning as the context of depoliticization. The literature on depoliticization has not yet systematically taken up the “politics of the future” (vision-making, anticipatory governance, foresight, etc.) as a context for studying depoliticization, and this is where I would position the central contribution of Article

I. The production of visions and other “techniques of futuring” (Oomen *et al.* 2021: 254) have grown increasingly important in political governance, and they have thus also become central terrains of political struggles. For example, by focusing on the dynamics of depoliticization in vision-making, the temporal depth of depoliticization can be expanded. Article I illustrates that this process is not just about foreclosing the future from the possibility of radical politics but is rather a more subtle “...projection into the future of the general tendencies prevailing at a given moment in time” (Poulantzas 1980: 192).

Thus, extrapolating from Article I, the production and the politics of visions is, slightly paradoxically, more related to the present than the future, and the extension of the present conditions to the future. Here, the differentiation of spheres and their material interdependencies should be kept in mind. By focusing only on the political sphere, the larger reproduction of the non-political societal mechanisms is missed. This means that depoliticization can be seen as one stabilization mechanism that seeks to delimit the operational autonomy of the political sphere to ensure that all other societal subsystems function in conjunction with it. In this setting, visions do not become celebrations of contingent and open-ended futures but rather a way to orchestrate the performance of different societal spheres to ensure their optimal functioning. The delimitation of the operational autonomy of politics can therefore emerge as 1.) a demand from outside politics (“you need to delimit your power to ensure market stability”) or 2.) a self-regulatory realization from the political agents themselves (“we need to self-regulate our decision-making in order not to jeopardize market stability”). Thus, incremental and predictable change between the present and the future becomes the norm, and the politics of the future becomes a carefully stage-managed projection of the present conditions into the future.

The empirical focus on visionary planning presents a fruitful opportunity to analyze the political imaginary that guides the development of urban spaces. The depoliticization of urban futures is not just a matter of particular discourses or discursive formations but rather concerns the whole semiotic system and the role politics is assigned within this sense- and meaning-making system. The role of politics in spatial development is to recognize the structural facts of global urbanization as inevitable and to carefully regulate and facilitate the optimal performance of other societal subsystems, especially the economy. Through this recognition, particular discourses within the political imaginary emerge as ready-made answers to the problem to stabilize and legitimize this specific role of politics. Thus, the semiotic system itself, through which the problems of the material world are viewed, contains the larger demarcation and delimitation of the political sphere onto which the particular “depoliticizing discourses” are then mapped. The semiotic system defines what is seen as the future trajectories of development, what the capabilities of politics is to respond to these new changes, and how politics should function in this setting.

In the case of CCV2040, the content and issues of politics are economized to facilitate economic growth and valorization. The space of politics is then reduced to technical minutiae which do not threaten the long-term stability of the urban growth model. The material interdependencies between politics and economics thus haunt these imaginaries of spatial development, and today’s actually existing (urban) politics is materially tied to the reproduction of capitalist social relations. It should be noted that various societal agents (both inside and outside politics) may very well be correctly taking into account these material interdependencies and attempting to depoliticize and delimit the political sphere to curb even latent potentials that might result in destabilizing

political contestation. This cannot be reduced to the mere perpetuation of nefarious false consciousness. Rather, the reproduction of capitalist social relations in general needs to be taken into account, as it is integrally connected with depoliticization.

Therefore, rather than positing normative assumptions and theories about how politics under capitalism should be more adversarial or agonistic (for example, Mouffe 1993, 2005), this material interdependence should be better recognized and understood. Politics is not and cannot be a “truly” autonomous sphere no more than any other sphere can. Thus, a normative critique of depoliticization cannot then begin and proceed merely as a critique of politics as such—into which many normative critiques of depoliticization fall. It must be a critique of the social totality within which politics itself is placed and a critique of the social relations that produce the specific place for politics as a neutralized sphere.

6.2 Article II: Forest bioeconomy

Article II analyzed the depoliticizations related to the Finnish forest bioeconomy transition. While forest politics has been strongly politicized throughout modern Finnish history, the impending ecological and climatic crises have introduced new themes to the public debate on forests. The debate is roughly polarized between the industrial utilization of forest resources and the protection and preservation of forest ecologies and carbon sinks. The forest bioeconomy’s selling point for the public has been its alleged ability to resolve this dilemma by pivoting the pulp-and-paper-driven forest industry toward innovative high-value products. At its core, the forest bioeconomy is a contradictory promise of “more of everything” (Kröger & Raitio 2017): continued intensive utilization of forest resources, pivoting industrial production to renewable bio-based products, more carbon sequestration by carefully managing the forest carbon cycle, and more recreational and nature values. The bioeconomy attempts to square the circle, but this approach may also be its strength, as it can function as a basket of contradictory promises from which various lobby groups can pick and choose their preferred arguments. This reproduction of the bioeconomy’s political and economic imaginary is studied in Article II in the context of the 2019 parliamentary elections, during which forest carbon sinks and forest industry investments were the hotly contested topics of the election season.

The bioeconomy can be conceptualized as a socioecological fix (Ekers & Prudham 2015, 2017, 2018) that attempts to reconfigure the forest metabolism to better conform to new demands of capitalist production. Changes in the global political economy matter as one of the motive forces behind the bioeconomy transformation. As was explored in depth in Articles II and III, the pulp-and-paper-focused production model of the Finnish forest industry has been in a slow structural crisis since the mid-2000s. In particular, excess paper production capacity relative to declining global paper demand has led to a situation in which increasing amounts of fixed capital tied to paper production have become a problem for the large forest conglomerates. The bioeconomy presents an opportunity to shed production capacity, reinvest in new biorefineries, and assemble new formations of fixed capital. As such, the bioeconomy is reorganizing socioecological relations, as well as the spatiotemporal relations of capitalist production and capital flows, to find a new temporal solution.

Naturally, the bioeconomy not only concerns capital flows but also representational and ideological elements (Ekers & Prudham 2018: 27; Kellokumpu 2022: 1165).

These representational and ideological elements constitute the accompanying political imaginary of the bioeconomy. Three key discursive framings are recognized in Article II. The first discourse of rural reinvigoration presents a forceful defense of the interests of peripheral regions. As such, it is a spatially politicized discourse that garners political support from the rural–urban division. The second discourse relates to the materiality of the forest ecology and carbon cycle and sees the forests as carbon conveyors (Palmer 2021). This legitimizes the view that increasing the utilization of forests is compatible with carbon neutrality goals when forests are kept in an efficient state of growth. In this view, forest cycles are attuned to the temporal demands of capital. The third discourse is economic, and it presents the bioeconomy as a high-value accumulation regime that can produce “more economic value out of less” by kickstarting a new economic growth cycle from bioinnovations. This signals both to the state and the forest-owning public the economic potential of the bioeconomy regime and thus seeks to direct public investments to this transformation.

In Article II, depoliticization emerges as a strategy to politically consolidate the bioeconomy regime. The bioeconomy’s political imaginary attempts to build a coherent narrative that can unite the large bloc of forest owners, the forest industry, and the state in the new context of climate change and economic restructuring. Here, the peculiar historical circumstances of forest ownership in Finland play a crucial role, as the ownership structure is rather dispersed. This means that successfully consolidating the bioeconomy requires a vast public apparatus of ideological reproduction so that a sufficient part of the disparate mass of individual forest owners falls into line with the agenda. It is an issue that cuts across different social strata. Thus, forest politics is comparatively more outward-facing and inherently politicized in a situation in which the forest industry and the state have been unable to monopolize it through large-scale ownership (for more on this history, see Kellokumpu 2022: 1171). The various political and lobby groups aligned with the economic interests of the forest industry are quick to forcefully police the boundaries of what is considered “legitimate” forest politics. Depoliticization is often advanced through intense strategic politicization in which, for example, rural–urban divisions are used to construct an equivalence between the interests of rural areas and the economic interests of the forest industry.

I would argue based on the analysis in Article II that the focus on the construction and reproduction of particular growth models like the bioeconomy bring the various material interdependencies of the political sphere to the fore. The analysis draws on Berry’s and Lavery’s (2017: 250–251) contention that

One key role for the state is therefore to successfully enact a strategy that commands general acceptance of a particular model of development across society [...] Analyses of depoliticization strategies and narratives must start from an understanding of the economic imaginaries that are embodied in the configuration of policymaking institutions (or, more precisely, reconfiguration, because depoliticization usually refers to some process of institutional reform).

The bioeconomy exemplifies, how the dynamics of depoliticization and politicization reverberate from the extra-political sphere and how political-economic imaginaries like the bioeconomy flow to the public sphere and state institutions. Here, the material changes in the global political economy, impending climate and ecological crises, and spatially uneven development cannot be left unaccounted for. The three central discourses recognized in Article II all purport to present a solution to each of these.

The discourse of rural reinvigoration promises to resolve the dilemma of the “left behind places” of uneven urbanization through bioeconomic regional development. The discourse of forests as carbon conveyors seeks to advance the (paradoxical) view of carbon neutral felling, in which the increased utilization of forest resources and climate change mitigation goals can be made commensurate, thus, aiming to be one of the solutions to climate change. And the discourse of the bioeconomy as a high-value accumulation regime purports to solve the profitability crisis of the pulp and paper production model and pivot the forest industry through economic restructuring.

This presents an overview of how depoliticization should be analyzed as one technique of political action that is integrally related to the production of ideological cohesion for a particular mode of development. The need to establish such ideological cohesion stems from the need to find a strategic direction for the state that can coherently respond to the various and constant changes in the material world.

Based on the analysis of Article II and Article III (see section 6.3), I would argue for the need for the depoliticization literature to decenter the political sphere and politics even more radically. Politics should be placed in its proper position as an operationally autonomous but always materially interdependent system of decision-making. The problems that Jessop (2014: 208) terms pan-politicism and sur-politicism still implicitly haunt much of the literature and conceptualizations of depoliticization. Pan-politicism and sur-politicism are reflexive tendencies to see and interpret politics and the political everywhere and deny any limiting specificities to the political sphere. This means that the sphere of politics is then ever-expanding, and the analytical usefulness of focusing on politics diminishes over time. The focus on the construction and reproduction of accumulation regimes like the bioeconomy help put politics in its proper place not as the determining field of societal action but as a sphere that is—in its current configuration—tied to the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Paradoxically, to further develop the analyses of depoliticization, the focus should be on the extra-political and resist overtly broad definitions of politics.

Overall, reflecting on Article I with Article II, a notable contrast between the urban and rural growth models can be detected. Both respond to the economic and political changes of global urbanization in their own way. The urban growth model aims to resolve the positive problem of how to manage, direct, and finetune the expected growth in global competition against other cities, whereas the bioeconomic imaginary attempts to respond to the negative problem of rural decline. Both imaginaries present a spatiotemporal fix through which the accumulation of capital can be sustained—albeit with different methods and for the time being—while the regional allegiances of these growth models seem to be clearly demarcated.

6.3 Article III: Forest capital and the politics of public interest

Article III analyzes depoliticization and public interest politics in the Kaipola paper mill shutdown, where the forest conglomerate UPM attempted to shift the blame for the mill closure to the governing coalition and its policies. The closure became politicized in the media after CEO Jussi Pesonen published an open letter to the Finnish government decrying a hostile business environment and demanding new competitiveness measures so that domestic industry was not “forced” to outsource its functions to more competitive states. The demands aimed to reform tax and labor market policies according to the demands of forest capital and especially curbing the power of the strong labor unions

in the forest industry sector. What made this intervention a rather rare event was the public manner in which UPM initiated it, and how Pesonen invoked the public role of the forest conglomerate in the financial reproduction of society (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 352). Here, the various options UPM could have taken should be kept in mind. The forest conglomerate and its representatives could have chosen the business-as-usual route of attempting to exert this kind of extra-parliamentary influence away from the public eye. Yet UPM chose to do this publicly, which reveals that they saw some strategic value in publicly politicizing the issue. We argue that the Kaipola case presented a window of opportunity for UPM to discipline the government coalition.

By examining the structural changes in the forest industry and UPM's internal strategies, we argue that the Kaipola paper mill closure falls into line with the long-term strategy adopted by UPM and bears no direct relation to the specific policies of the government coalition. Rather, the closure was an opportune moment to embark on a larger crusade to advance UPM's and the forest industry's economic interests. In Article III, we briefly touched on how the Kaipola closure paved the way for the withdrawal of the forest industry employer organization FFIF (Finnish Forest Industries Federation) from collective bargaining. What ensued immediately after the publication of Article III was a labor dispute between the Paperworkers' Union and UPM which resulted in a 112-day strike in UPM plants between January 2022 and April 2022 (UPM 2022). The strike threatened the European printing paper supply chain to the extent that Intergraf, the European printing industry association, appealed to UPM to end the strike because of depleting printing paper stock (STTK 2022).

The central issue of public interest and what we term the politics of public interest is addressed in Article III. We identify public interest politics as “(1) a terrain of political struggles, (2) a mode of doing politics, and (3) as a method of enquiry” (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 342). First, the notion of public interest defines the strategic direction of the state and as such function as a terrain of political struggles. Strategic selectivity is key, as the question of who and whose interests is included in particular definitions of public interest. We argue that in the contemporary setting, public interest politics is defined through the corporate polity in which the economic success of export-oriented capital fractions is equated with the public interest. Second, public interest can also function as a mode of doing politics in the sense that it can be used as a form of political rhetoric, discourse, or representation by appealing to or invoking certain definitions of the public interest. Third, we argue that public interest politics can also function as a *method of enquiry* for examining the depoliticizing (and politicizing) dynamics in the construction and reproduction of specific economic growth models and political imaginaries. This means that refocusing the analysis on public interest politics can open new avenues for the depoliticization literature.

Thus far, the literature on depoliticization has not paid systematic attention to the public interest, and “the general or public interest is often recognized as a depoliticized imaginary...” (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 342). It is correct to recognize the depoliticizing maneuvers related to the public interest, as it is indeed illusory in the sense that it always excludes some interests or privileges certain interests over others. However, we argue that treating public interest merely as a depoliticizing maneuver can lead astray. The politics of public interest can shift the focus to how the strategic direction of the state is negotiated in the public sphere. The nature of political life compels political agents to articulate and universalize their interests as the interests of the society as a whole. This process of universalization naturally has a distinct class

character in capitalism, which means that public interest politics is reproduced along the lines of class division.

Article III shows how UPM's politicization of the Kaipola closure invoked the imaginary of the public interest to argue for the central role of forest capital in the financial reproduction of society. The economic competitiveness of the state needs to be cared for through tax and labor market reforms so that the success of the key capital fractions ensures the financial continuation of the welfare state. This is key in positioning UPM as the guardian of the Finnish economy in the context of a hugely unpopular closure decision. This also shows how economic actors, in this case UPM, also use politicization and depoliticization in an attempt to regulate the political sphere. Pesonen's proposal to delimit the maneuvering space of government coalitions in favor of a more long-term economic policy vision (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 353) resembles the temporal shift of politics in the same way as visionary planning (in section 5.1). This temporal shift provides a base on which to establish the bioeconomy as the growth model and to solidify continued public investment in the forest industry.

Thus, by placing the analytical focus on public interest politics in the specific context of growth model building, the balance of social forces affecting the situation can begin to be teased out. The UPM maneuver, for example, can be interpreted as a "politicize to depoliticize" move that sought to forcefully restate the role of UPM and the Finnish forest industry in public interest politics. While in some respects bold, the motivations of this move can also stem from an interpretation of precarity. While their business might currently be profitable, the UPM leadership interpreted their long-term position and the operational environment as sufficiently precarious to merit a politically proactive and public move. There are various reasons for this, including the economic restructuring related to the bioeconomy, changes in parliamentary dynamics, the position of the labor unions, and the position of the forest industry in the larger landscape of the Finnish economy vis-à-vis other capital fractions. It is crucial here to recognize the eagerness of UPM to adopt a public and political role. While the other large forest conglomerates remained silent during the Kaipola closure and were able to solve their labor disputes in early 2022, UPM was willing to take negative public backlash during the closure and incur significant economic damage during the four-month labor dispute with the Paperworkers' Union. This strongly signals that UPM was willing to take up the initiative to reshape the strategic direction of the state through extra-parliamentary means.

Again, Article III demonstrates how discursive depoliticization and politicization flow dialectically with material changes. The Kaipola closure is a small scene in the larger structural global and national changes in the forest industry, but one which shows that a specific interpretation of the current conjuncture by a large forest conglomerate compelled them to attempt to reshape labor-capital-state relations by politicizing the closure decision. The chosen public method invoked the role of key capital fractions in the economic reproduction of society as a whole, thus signaling that the issue at hand was not about the particular economic interest of this or that company but rather about how these particular economic interests were universal.

In addition to the analytical focus on public interest politics, I would especially highlight as one key contribution of Article III this process of universalization as the pivotal mode of doing public interest politics. Universalization denotes the process through which societal actors seek to articulate particular, sectional, or class interests as the general interest of the whole society (Kellokumpu & Sirviö 2022: 344). At its core, universalization is therefore a process of abstraction: The abstract notion of public

interest is reified (made to appear concrete) through the logic of universalization, which overextends and selectively defines the content of public interest.

6.4 Reflections on the theoretical contributions of the thesis

In this section, I attempt to bring together the various strands of the argument of this thesis with the articles discussed here and outline the contribution that this thesis as a whole could bring to the study of depoliticization. Needless to say, packaging these contributions and themes neatly and concisely into an easily digestible format may prove difficult, and the result arduous for the reader. However, I will attempt to move systematically from the very beginning of section 2 by relating the results and the contributions of the articles to the promises set out in the thesis.

I would like to begin this reflection by restating the need to find a proper material basis for the phenomenon of depoliticization. I argue that the basis of depoliticization can be found at the abstract-ontological level from the functional differentiation of societal spheres, and at the more concrete-historical level, this should be complemented by the recognition that in the context of the capitalist mode of production, depoliticization appears mainly through the delineation between the political and the economic spheres. Here, Wood (1997, 2016) and Jessop (2008) outline the historical process of how the economy becomes the dominant subsystem. Drawing on Articles I, II, and III, the main point of reference for depoliticization is the kind of boundary work between politics and economics, whether it be the depoliticization of visionary planning to construct stable political environments for urban investment, the attempt to depoliticize the bioeconomic growth model in the public sphere, or the public crusade of a forest conglomerate to bring a government coalition in line with their definition of public interest. Here, I do not mean that all analyses of depoliticization should be somehow “reduced” to the interactions between politics and the economy or that the economy should be somehow fetishized as the sole basis from which depoliticization emanates. Rather, I aim to highlight how depoliticization is structurally conditioned by capitalist social relations. Reflecting on the articles, depoliticization appears as a mode of regulating the operational autonomy of politics to ensure the stable reproduction of capitalist social relations.

Again reflecting on the beginning of section 2, the importance of distinguishing between operational autonomy and material interdependence cannot be overstated. Different approaches that assume politics to be fully autonomous or to normatively evaluate actually existing politics against an idealized picture of fully autonomous politics are fundamentally unable to grasp this distinction and may miss some important facets of depoliticization. I would argue that depoliticization can appear both as an *internal* realization of the need to self-regulate the operational autonomy of politics by political decision-makers (akin to Article I) or as an *external* pressure by other societal agents to impose limitations on the operational autonomy of politics (akin to Article III). The fact that societal spheres materially depend on the performance of other spheres reminds us that the political sphere should always be analyzed not as a self-contained field but as one part of the social totality in which the prevailing social relations are reproduced. Politics has the operational autonomy to start producing decisions that undermine the reproduction of capitalist social relations, but this naturally runs the risk of a general systemic breakdown.

Here, we can conceptualize the societal power of depoliticization through the process of abstraction (for real abstraction, see Bonefeld 2014; Lange 2022; O’Kane 2020; Toscano 2008), which constantly reifies and reconstructs the differentiation of societal spheres. Depoliticization is not just a matter of “ideologically concealing political reality” (Teivainen 2002: 318) but is rather a concretely real product of the process in which ontologically undifferentiable and complex human interaction is divided into separated spheres through abstract categorization to deal with social complexity. To put this more simply, ontologically one cannot separate political action from economic action, for example. Purchasing a commodity is as much a political action as it is an economic action (and both are ultimately human action). However, to grasp this undifferentiated ontological complexity and to direct and govern human interaction, a division of labor needs to emerge in which “political” things are separated from “economic” things, and these are allocated to their respective “political” and “economic” spheres.

The differentiation is an abstraction in the sense that a simplified demarcation is imposed on social reality which then becomes a causal factor as human interaction is reshaped around this demarcation. All the thesis articles speak to this issue, as the economy is in each case a reified abstraction that necessitates a certain political response. This can be finetuning urban space through growth-oriented visionary planning to ensure a politically stable investment environment in the city, the attempt to construct a new forestry paradigm in the context of climate change that ensures the continuation of extractivism and the profitability of the forest industry, or the politicization of a mill closure to pressurize a government to enact favorable economic policies that solidify the economic interests of a key capital fraction.

All three articles point toward how the political sphere is regulated through various economic (and economized) concerns, and how depoliticization emerges as a key strategy in exercising state power (Etherington & Jones 2018: 53). In Article I, this appears as the construction of long-term ideological fixture points that attempt to displace short-term political conflicts by shifting the temporality of local urban politics and planning. Article II demonstrates how the construction and reproduction of the bioeconomy’s political imaginary in the public sphere aims to reconcile the interests of the forest industry, the state, and forest owners behind depoliticized forest politics. In turn, Article III shows how individual economic actors (like UPM) can attempt to use politicization and depoliticization to exert pressure on the key nodes of state power to defend their economic interests.

The thesis articles provide a crucial perspective on the developing rural–urban relations in the Finnish state space (Moisio 2012, 2018; Moisio & Sirviö 2021). Both urban growth and the bioeconomy agenda respond to the larger structural trend of global urbanization in their own way, but both appear rather disjointed from one another. The imaginary of urban growth relies heavily on dubious notions of knowledge-intensive immaterial growth premised on high-tech, service-based, and smart city discourses (Article I). Little consideration is given to the concrete material infrastructure that is needed to maintain knowledge-intensive capitalism. Because of this, the imaginary of the urban growth model appears spatially self-contained and able to reproduce itself without any relationship to the surrounding periphery. Contrary to this, the bioeconomy goes to the core of the matter by aiming to transform the material reproduction of society by shifting the resource base of society toward (bio)renewables.

However, the problem of ideological capture and appropriation has become central, as dominant economic interests have been able to shape the bioeconomy from a transformative agenda toward one that increasingly greenwashes current ecological

and economic practices (Articles II & III; see also Ramcilovic-Suominen *et al.* 2022). The bioeconomy promises to revitalize peripheral economies, but without the transformative agenda, it runs the risk of actually further entrenching rural areas in extractivist and resource-intensive modes of development. Because of the rural blind spot left open by the urban growth model, these extractivist models can too easily be advanced through spatial populist tactics that rely on lingering resentment in rural populations. The core question of whether these growth models can present a realistic spatially integrative development agenda is cast aside in favor of a rural–urban culture war. This is low-hanging fruit for stoking the voter base for elections, but it ignores the solving of the larger problems brewing amidst spatial restructuring.

In terms of the depoliticization literature, the thesis aims to develop a synthesis between the so-called first and second waves (Flinders & Wood 2014; Hay 2014) and sharpen the analytical horizons of depoliticization. Instead of demarcating the depoliticization literature into a first and second wave, its development might be better understood as a continuous analytical expansion in which depoliticization is conceptually stretched and made to fit into different contexts and theoretical commitments. In the approach that I adopted for this thesis, I attempted to take the problem of conceptual inflation and stretching seriously. As a result of the articles presented here and this accompanying synopsis, I would argue that the thesis presents one approach to (successfully) grounding the more expansive analyses of ideological and discursive depoliticization in the concrete material developments of political economy and spatial change.

Rather than wholly rejecting the expansive use of depoliticization, the more expansive uses should be retraced and more firmly grounded in the material developments in each context. Concentrating on city-regionalist urban growth and the bioeconomy follows and extends on Berry's and Lavery's (2017) suggestions concerning focusing on growth model building as the key nexus for analyzing depoliticization and politicization dynamics. Thus, the inspiration for this approach draws heavily on the first wave of the depoliticization literature, complementing it with strategic-relational state theory. Here, I would also argue that instead of regurgitating post-structuralist approaches to discursive depoliticization, the methodological approach of cultural political economy (Jessop 2004, 2010, 2013; Sum & Jessop 2013) can help properly bridge this uneasy gap between materiality and discursivity.

The contributions of this thesis to the emergent field of what I have termed, the “geographies of depoliticization” are twofold. In relation to analyses of depoliticization and post-politics in urban geography and urban studies (e.g., Beveridge & Koch 2017, 2017b; Davidson & Iveson 2015; Dikeç & Swyngedouw 2017), this thesis highlights the need to incorporate the context of constantly evolving rural–urban relations into the larger depoliticization of urban politics. Perhaps this is in large part due to the nature of the sub-disciplinary boundary-making and staking out of a specialized field related to the urban as an object of study. Nevertheless, staking out the developing rural–urban relations in the state space as a contextual referent for urban depoliticization might result in a more spatially rich analysis.

In terms of the more regionally focused state spatial restructuring debate, the thesis articulates a perspective on the material and ideological conflicts developing in the “collective politics of the spatial structure” amidst intense urbanization (Moisio & Sirviö 2021). In addition to developing city-regionalism (Jonas & Moisio 2018), the blind spots of urbanization leave various ideological and discursive vacuums open that other types of growth models like the bioeconomy can attempt to fill. Such vacuums

are advantageous spaces for depoliticization and politicization, which different actors can attempt to exploit in the state's larger spatial politics. For example, in the political imaginary of the bioeconomy, the forest industry can attempt to hegemonize the discursive space of rural development by drawing an equivalence between its economic interests and the disillusioned rural populace.

The methodological contribution of the thesis that is worth highlighting and exploring further is the proposition that discourses should be more readily interpreted as reactive and opportunistic. This shift would place discourse analysis in its proper place and ground it materially by readjusting the causal chain. The assumption that discourses actively shape reality is unfounded, as it proposes that social agents are always one step ahead of reality. Rather, discourses have the latent potential to do so, but one cannot assume that this potential is always realized. The post-structuralist methodological influence seems to drive this causal misrecognition. Fully exploring the implications of this methodological proposition is not within the scope of this thesis, and it would merit its own text. However, this methodological proposition should be further developed in future research to better situate critical discourse analysis as a method.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has explored depoliticization in its various manifestations in the general context of capitalist social relations, the real and illusory differentiation of politics and economics under capitalism, and state spatial development in Finland. I have attempted to move from the abstract-theoretical to the concrete-empirical to present a holistic and grounded approach to analyzing depoliticization. In the attempt to trace an internally coherent and rigorous whole, many topics have undoubtedly been left underexplored, while many others may appear to be surprising inclusions. The attempt to successfully “ground” or pin down depoliticization for analysis is no easy task, as successfully grounding depoliticization hinges on how one defines politics in the first place. Thus, the analytical terrain that is politics is constantly moving under one’s feet. If depoliticization is denoted in its simplest and most ahistorical form as a process in which political “things” are transformed into non-political “things,” almost everything depends on what is political. This fact produces constant conceptual tension in the analysis, as the tendency of contemporary social and political inquiry has been the constant expansion of the notion of politics and the political. The tendency of pan-politicism interprets politics to be everywhere, which blurs the lines needed for an analytically sharp examination of depoliticization.

Despite attempting to properly ground depoliticization in the historical and geographical development of capitalism, I must admit that major conceptual questions remain. When embarking on the journey of the study of depoliticization, I hoped to find a glimpse of analytical clarity along the way that would somehow crystallize the essence of depoliticization. Instead, I found myself increasingly questioning all the priors that I had learned about depoliticization, while attempting at the same time to provide a holistic contribution that would not be self-contradictory. My aim was not to muddy the already muddy waters around depoliticization and post-politics even further but to attempt to cut through the haze. Approaching depoliticization in a simple yet subtle way proved quite difficult.

Because of the nature of the compilation thesis process, the synopsis and the included articles inevitably contain slightly different interpretations of depoliticization. Many of the central tenets presented in this synopsis became clear to me toward the end of the research process. One was the need to provide a narrow rather than an expansive notion of politics. The driving force has been to find a materialist explanation of depoliticization that also takes into account the intensely ideological character of depoliticization.

Based on the process of the thesis, I attempt to offer a definition of depoliticization that falls into line with the commitments of this thesis. The definition is not an abstractly all-encompassing one but is based on the historical assumption that the prevailing social relations are defined by the capitalist mode of production.

In these specific historical conditions, depoliticization 1) is based materially on the complex differentiation and separation of politics from other societal spheres, 2) arises as a causal-material force in the world when this differentiation is reified and reproduced in social practice, 3) manifests itself dominantly (but not exclusively) through the demarcation of politics and economics in the context of capitalist social relations, 4) appears either as an internal or external delimitation of the operational autonomy of the political sphere, 5) seeks primarily to secure the reproduction of the economy as the ecologically dominant (Jessop 2008: 163–169) societal sphere, and 6) is

perpetuated through modes that set favorable conditions for capital accumulation and the continuation of capitalist social relations.

The definition presented is by no means flawless, but it emphasizes the theoretical bases from which the arguments of this thesis have largely stemmed. The ambiguous nature of depoliticization remains a central dilemma, but by grounding the analysis in specific historical and geographical conditions, some starting points can start to be laid out. Because of conceptual stretching, depoliticization seems to fit anywhere as a framework for analyzing contemporary politics, as any kind of denial of choice or contingency can be interpreted as depoliticization. This tendency toward conceptual stretching can be resisted by specifying the material conditions with which politics is entangled.

Paradoxically, I would argue that one of the main takeaways of this thesis is in a certain sense the need for the defetishization of the political and politics in studying depoliticization. Rather than attempting to find politics everywhere and elevating it to an analytical pedestal, the key to depoliticization might very well be found in all things non-political. This decentering of the political might help clarify the various relations between the societal spheres better than formulating a normative criterion for politics and then searching for the political on this basis. Thus, having an exclusive rather than an all-encompassing definition of (or referent for) politics better clarifies the role of depoliticization in the governance of contemporary capitalist democracies.

Here, the balancing act is again between analytical clarity and the risk of reifying hard boundaries between societal spheres. The key is to examine how society has historically developed in a manner in which societal actors act as if they were separate and through this reproduce the boundaries between societal spheres which then enable depoliticization to emerge. Capitalist social relations have enabled this differentiation to take place and produce specific forms of depoliticization predicated on the separation of the economy and politics.

There are also definite limits to using depoliticization as an analytical category. To trace the movement of depoliticization and politicization, one would first have to (at least tentatively) demarcate what is political and non-political and make sense of the moving terrain of politics. Here, much depoliticization analysis can be based on the conceptual ambiguity between the political and the non-political and the theoretical ambiguities of different intellectual lineages that conceptualize politics. This often results in the question of how to operationalize depoliticization empirically, and what counts as depoliticization. This question might be illustrated by Article III, for example: Is the fact that a forest conglomerate attempts to exert extra-parliamentary influence in the public sphere an example of depoliticization or politicization? Is this maneuver depoliticization in the sense that an economic actor seeks to delimit the operational autonomy of political actors, or is it politicization in the sense that an economic actor seeks to transform itself into a political actor and thus attempt to expand the notion of who can be a political actor?

Despite the limitations, depoliticization still seems a pivotal framework for analyzing the development of contemporary politics and political governance. This thesis has demonstrated how depoliticization emerges as a multifaceted process and strategy in the context of the spatial development of the state. Depoliticization appears as one method through which the “place” of politics in capitalist society is reproduced, and by extension, the prevailing capitalist social relations are reproduced. The autonomy of politics is placed within the systemic reproduction of the social totality, and manifold

external pressures are thus placed on politics. The ecological dominance (see, Jessop 2008: 163–169) of the economy, as well as economic and economized concerns, provides the primary, but not exclusive, referent for depoliticization in a capitalist society. Thus, analyzing the relations between politics and economics and the boundary work between them is crucial for teasing out the contemporary forms of depoliticization. This thesis provides one view of how different economic growth models travel through and are reproduced in politics and the public sphere, and how they purport to resolve the various ecological, economic, and spatial contradictions.

Depoliticization is also a crucial phenomenon to grasp for human geographical research, and there are multiple opportunities to further expand the umbrella of the geographies of depoliticization outside urban geography and the state spatial restructuring debate, in which the spatial aspects of depoliticization have been most discussed. The interest in depoliticization outside these two focus areas in geographical research has been relatively sporadic and unsystematic. If depoliticization appears as part of the analysis, it does so in most cases as an offhand remark that relies on an ambiguous and colloquial understanding of the concept without a further examination of its spatial implications or the theoretical basis of what constitutes politics and the political in the first place. Here, I think a deeper dive into depoliticization (as in this thesis) may point to a common ground from where to develop the geographies of depoliticization further. One can raise valid objections to the theoretical commitments adopted in this thesis, but some of the questions raised here are still crucial for understanding depoliticization. I would argue that this thesis points to the need to take the differentiation of societal spheres seriously and to attempt to ground depoliticization in a materialist analysis of society and not purely as a phenomenon of ideological obfuscation.

Depoliticization as a concept has always had a politically normative content, going back to Carl Schmitt's critical analysis of depoliticization in liberalism (Schmitt 2007; Flinders & Wood 2014; Luukkonen & Sirviö 2019). The default way is to see depoliticization as “bad” (politically detrimental and an oppressive closure of democratic deliberation) and politicization as “good” (an expression of a democratic spirit or essence). Although this thesis has shied away from an overtly normative interpretation of depoliticization, this does not mean that all avenues of social critique have been abandoned. The levels of this normative critique must be revised and specified. Very often the normative critique that is advanced with depoliticization is merely a critique of politics as such. Here, I think the influence of post-Marxist conceptualizations weighs heavily (see section 2.2 and Kouvelakis 2021), as the Marxist critique of the social totality was abandoned in favor of a critique of the political and politics. Thus, the post-political conceptualizations and the radical democratic perspectives à la Mouffe, Laclau, and others seem to carry the baggage of privileging the political sphere as the exclusive realm of normative critique. This intellectual baggage tends to bleed into various normative critiques of depoliticization in which the (full) autonomy of politics is the normative yardstick. Yet, again, this view fails to interrogate the various entanglements that affect the autonomy of politics.

Here, I would contend that a normative critique of depoliticization cannot be advanced merely as a critique of politics and the political, but rather that the basis for the critique of depoliticization stems from the wider critique of the social totality within which politics is but one facet. To normatively critique contemporary depoliticization, one cannot critique only politics as such and its consensus-driven forms or the lack of agonism/antagonism. Instead, the critique of depoliticization must be a critique of *the specific position of politics within the social totality* that compels it to reproduce and regulate

the prevailing capitalist social relations. Thus, depoliticization is not an internal process of politics but falls in relation to the complex reproduction of the social totality in which all the other societal spheres place their demands on politics. The scale of the normative critique of depoliticization should then move from a particular critique of politics to a holistic critique of the social totality (for the intellectual lineages of the concept of totality, see Jay 1986). This move would provide a more stable base for normatively evaluating the detrimental effects of depoliticization and would move the conversation forward from the implicit assumptions of “bad” depoliticization toward the motive forces that drive depoliticization in the contemporary conjuncture.

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