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Colin Hay. Depoliticisation as process, governance as practice: what did the ‘first wave’ get wrong and do we need a ‘second wave’ to put it right?. *Policy and Politics*, 2014, 42 (2), pp.293-311. 10.1332/030557314X13959960668217 . hal-02186489

**HAL Id: hal-02186489**

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-02186489>

Submitted on 17 Jul 2019

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# Depoliticisation as process, governance as practice: what did the ‘first wave’ get wrong and do we need a ‘second wave’ to put it right?

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To what extent do we need a ‘second-wave’ of writing on depoliticisation to correct the biases of the first and thereby to improve our capacity to gain analytical traction on the dynamic interplay between politicising and depoliticising tendencies in contemporary liberal democracies? In this article I welcome the debate this special issue has opened, but defend the first wave against its critics. More specifically, I argue that the first wave literature provides ample analytical and theoretical resources to capture the dynamic interplay between depoliticising tendencies and politicising or repoliticising counter-tendencies which its critics rightly place at centre stage. Indeed, I go further, suggesting that the more empirical contributions of the special issue, while bringing a series of new and important insights to the analysis of politicisation–depoliticisation dynamics, in fact do so by drawing extensively on first wave depoliticisation theory. Such work is very necessary and advances significantly our understanding of depoliticising, but it extends rather than challenges first wave perspectives and is ultimately better characterised as ‘second generation’ rather than ‘second wave’.

**key words** : politicisation • depoliticisation • repoliticisation • participation • political disaffection

## Introduction

I am extremely grateful to the editors of *Policy & Politics* for the opportunity to respond to this important, innovative and challenging collection of articles on the process of depoliticisation and the analytical strategies required to best understand its sources, dynamics and consequences. There has – alas – never been a better time to write about depoliticisation, judging by the contempt in which so many citizens hold political elites in most advanced liberal democracies today and the extent to which political elites continue to respond by placing at one remove the inherent contestability of decisions concerning the provision of collective public goods. Yet, despite the attention that the process of depoliticisation has received, the editors of this collection argue for the need to rethink and reconceptualise much of our existing understanding of this crucial set of linked concerns. They launch, in effect, a ‘second wave’ literature on depoliticisation.

I typically have great sympathy for second waves. They offer a way of correcting the almost inevitable biases and distortions that creep into and accumulate within a

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new and often hastily developed body of literature prompted by the urgent need to come to terms with a recently identified problem, pathology or societal condition. That, I suspect, is very much the story of the first wave literature on depoliticisation, the limits of which this collection of articles seeks first to identify and then transcend. ‘Second waves’ are, then, generally rather good things, providing a necessary corrective to errors made in (perhaps forgivable) haste.

Here, however, I find myself somewhat more equivocal than usual. That is no doubt in part a product of being, perhaps for the first and only time in my career, identified as part of a ‘first wave’ – and proponents of first waves, as we know, have a tendency to make stubborn adversaries. I think, however, that there is more to this than that – though I suppose I would... For while there are undoubtedly certain biases and distortions which have come to characterise the first wave literature and while a number of these are well-identified in this collection (notably, the privileging of economic policy and nation-level decision-making processes empirically, the focus on depoliticisation at the expense of politicisation and the simplistic normative presumption that politicisation is good, depoliticisation bad), I think each is at least defensible as an analytic move, each is better than the alternative at the time, each is explicitly acknowledged (and justified) as a simplifying analytical device and, as a consequence, one does not need a bout of rethinking and reconceptualisation to correct such distortions.

In short, I think the ‘first wave’ is worthy of defending and in what follows I seek to provide that defence. I do so in an unapologetically provocative way, by taking issue with a number of the arguments and claims made in this important collection of articles – and by concentrating on those claims and arguments with which I take issue. I also do so with a profound sense of respect for and appreciation of the challenge these articles pose to the existing literature. There is much to learn from them, as I seek to make clear, just as I hope that there is much to learn from the debate and controversy this response aims to ignite.

Thus, although I am critical of aspects of each of the articles assembled in this collection, both individually and collectively I see them as making an important contribution to the existing literature. Yet, in the end, it is better to see that contribution as an extension and development of the first wave than as arising out of a clearly substantiated case for the need to transcend the conceptual limitations of the first wave in favour of a second. Consistent perhaps with such a view, I find the more empirical and substantive contributions with which the collection concludes ultimately more compelling than the more narrowly conceptual or theoretical pieces (those that would have to substantiate the claim for the need for a second wave and provide the alternative analytical bases for such a move).

In the pages that follow I seek, all too briefly, to defend such claims by considering each article in a little more detail. I begin with the more theoretical ones, before turning to the more substantive empirical pieces each of which I seek to show is quite compatible with the development and enrichment of the existing literature on depoliticisation.

## **One’s enemies’ enemies ... and one’s friends**

Perhaps precisely because it is the most explicit, the most unequivocal and the most programmatic in its commitment to the idea both of the need for a second wave and

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for this collection of articles as an opening salvo, in effect, in the launching of such a wave, it is the introductory article by Matthew Flinders and Matthew Wood of which I am perhaps the most critical. The claims they make for the limits of the existing literature are, I think, at times a little overstated, the case they make for their approach to depoliticisation as a cogent and holistic alternative (such as might constitute a credible second wave) is not entirely compelling, and the (Schmittian) concept of politics on which it is ostensibly predicated I find normatively troubling, analytically somewhat confusing and not entirely consistent with the articles that follow.

Their article opens by stating boldly that the ‘need for new perspectives’ on depoliticisation can, in the context of the ‘exceptional times’ occasioned by our present crisis, ‘hardly be denied’ (2014, 1). That, I think, is contestable. First, whether or not we live in ‘exceptional times’ and whether or not the crisis marks the passage from a ‘normal’ to an ‘exceptional’ phase of the political, it is problematic to assume that each such historical juncture requires new theoretical perspectives or even new conceptual resources. ‘New times’ do not require new theories. For the implication of such a view is that we can have no theoretically-informed account of the process of change itself; political analysis in effect becomes a science of equilibrium in a world we acknowledge to be characterised (albeit only periodically and intermittently) by disequilibrating ruptures.

There is, of course, a certain irony here. Indeed, there are two. The first is that this is exactly the kind of social science (in the form of neo-classical economic equilibrium theory most obviously) that led us to the crisis in the first place. It did so precisely because of its theoretical incapacity to countenance the possibility of disequilibrium (allied, of course, to its influence on those whose behaviour precipitated the crisis). Second, the existing literature on politicisation and depoliticisation is itself a dynamic theory of disequilibrium (pointing to the cumulatively destabilising consequences of ostensibly ‘rational’ behaviour and equilibrium thinking) – and, what is more, a disequilibrium theory closely linked to the anticipation and subsequent analysis of the crisis itself (see especially Crouch, 2004; 2008; 2009; Hay, 2006; 2007; 2011, but also Burnham, 2001). There is, then, something strangely perverse about making the case for an alternative to existing perspectives on depoliticisation by pointing to the extent to which the very crisis such theories anticipated (in part precisely because of the depoliticisation dynamic to which they pointed) has recast the parameters of the world in which we find ourselves.

Quite apart from this, *has* it done this? Is the world in which we find ourselves today so very different from that described in the first wave literature? Again, I find myself sceptical. Yes, there has been a widely acknowledged crisis; but, as the contributions of Burnham, Foster et al and Jessop in this collection all make clear (echoing a well-established orthodoxy in the wider literature), the tendency in the wake of the crisis has been to reaffirm and further consolidate a ‘logic of discipline’ over a logic of public accountability and/or democratic choice (Roberts, 2011). As such, the crisis (to date at least) has proved paradigm re-enforcing rather than paradigm threatening (Hay and Smith, 2014) in a manner again anticipated in the earlier literature. Indeed, it is presumably precisely for this reason that Flinders and Wood are able to refer to depoliticisation as the dominant model of statecraft in the twenty-first century. This makes it all the more confusing that the crisis might credibly be seen to signal the rise of a period of exceptional politics and that this, in turn, might be seen to necessitate a set of new perspectives on depoliticisation. A rather stronger case for

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the incapacity of existing perspectives to deal with the contemporary manifestation of the politicisation–depoliticisation nexus would first need to be presented. That is something this collection lacks.

More troubling in a way is Flinders and Wood's treatment of the concept of politics. They are of course right to seek to ground any notion of politicisation and depoliticisation in a concept of politics and they are also right, it strikes me, in seeking to think of politicisation and depoliticisation as linked concepts for capturing the dynamic interplay of tendency and counter-tendency (as in Hay, 2007, chapter 2). Insofar, however, as Schmitt's concept of politics has been 'overlooked' (Flinders and Wood, 2014, 136) in the existing literature on depoliticisation (and even this is something one might contest – see, for instance, Mouffe, 1993; Ranciere, 1995; Monagle 2010), there might well have been good reasons for this. For there are a range of objections to it – some specific to the debate about politicisation and depoliticisation, others more general.

That conception of politics is famously couched in terms of the friend/enemy distinction — indeed, the friend/enemy *opposition*. Politics, for Schmitt, is the process in and through which specific instances of the universal, ubiquitous, inevitable and inherent conflict between friend and enemy are settled — with authority, singularity and, above all, finality (2007, xiv). Such a conception has implications, some of which, to their credit, Flinders and Wood acknowledge, others which they, perhaps understandably, choose not to. The first implication, which Schmitt was anxious to emphasise and which they do acknowledge explicitly, is that liberal democracy is, in effect, the perpetration of a (depoliticising) fiction – in that, and to the extent that, it presents democratic deliberation as a means to the determination or adjudication of the collective good. For Schmitt there is no such thing as the collective good – merely the collective imposition of a singular interest or conception of the good over other competing interests or conceptions of the good. Politics is, in short, the triumph of friend over enemy; to pretend otherwise (to pretend, for instance, that we can all be friends within the terms of a democratic consensus) is to engage in a depoliticising demystification.

This is, as is perhaps already clear, a highly normative, singular and contestable conception of the political – and it is not difficult to see why it has proved so controversial. Above all, however, it is one that, whatever its appeal, poses particular problems when it comes to the contemporary debate in western liberal democracies (among political analysts and others) about politicising and depoliticising dynamics. Much could be said here, but I will confine myself to four brief observations.

First, in the context of such debates, and despite Flinders and Wood's protestations to the contrary, this is a somewhat limited conception of politics. It is of course useful to remind ourselves that all politics is concerned with the resolution of conflicts and that we are perhaps naïve to think that such conflicts can be resolved to the mutual satisfaction of all, but there is more to political life (and more to the concept of politics for political analysts and political practitioners) than the friend–enemy opposition. It is, at best, a dimension of politics – one, like many others, to which it is often useful to draw attention. Moreover, important though it is to be sensitive to the friend–enemy dimension present in all political practice, there are surely more or less appropriate and legitimate means of resolving the conflicts which characterise political practice. To dismiss all liberal democratic pretensions on the basis that they are predicated on the deceit that politics need not entail the triumph of a sectional interest, without first

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considering the credibility of the ensuing practice to deliver collective public goods (and, indeed, the contribution of politicising and/or depoliticising dynamics to such a capacity) seems both premature and unnecessarily defeatist. It also begs the question of why we would interest ourselves in the detailed internal machinations of liberal democratic governance if we had already made up our minds as to its central deceit.

Second, and related to this, to draw exclusive attention in one's definition of politics to the friend–enemy dimension (especially if one acknowledges that there are others) is to demonise politics unnecessarily. In a context in which politics is already widely demonised and where such demonisation has contributed significantly to the paradigm of depoliticisation that one is ostensibly interested in analysing, this seems particularly perverse. Again, there is a paradox here. For part of Flinders and Wood's objection to the existing (first wave) literature on depoliticisation is that it is, in their terms, overly normative – in that it tends towards the 'rather stale denunciation of depoliticisation as inherently... "bad"' (2014, 145). If normativity is the problem, then settling on an unapologetically normative (if pejorative) definition of politics (where, of course, the first wave literature has a neutral analytic definition) hardly seems like an appropriate antidote.

Indeed, one could go further. Though I acknowledge this to be a personal view I, for one, would wish staunchly to defend the normative stance of much of the (first wave) literature on depoliticisation, just as I would wish equally staunchly to defend the idea that politicised governance (which is visibly deliberative and accountable) is normatively preferable to depoliticised governance (in which decisions are made ostensibly in the public good but in private and without the capacity for public scrutiny). Political analysts (particularly those in receipt of public funds), I would contend, have at least a collective public duty to hold the practices of ostensibly democratic governance to account – and that, I think, entails a normative preference for politicised over depoliticised governance (even if it is possible to imagine circumstances under which depoliticisation might be deemed necessary). I suspect Flinders and Wood would agree, but the point is that I find it difficult to reconcile such a normative conviction with the Schmittian conception of politics which they here seek to advance.

A third problem with the turn to Schmitt is at the same time both semantic and practical. The Schmittian definition of politics threatens to turn on its head, in a way that Flinders and Wood fail fully to appreciate, the language of politicisation and depoliticisation in and through which the debate has been conducted up until this point. The potential for confusion is very considerable. The point is a simple one. If politics is, for Schmitt, a synonym for friend–enemy adversity and politicisation is, consequently, an index in effect of the clarity with which friend–enemy rivalries are articulated in ostensibly political contexts, then much of what we have been calling depoliticisation is politicising in Schmittian terms and much of what we have been calling politicisation is depoliticising! Flinders and Wood's own example may serve to clarify the nature of the confusion (if not the confusion itself). Their argument is that, in the exceptional circumstances of crisis, policy makers typically feel the need to assume greater decision-making powers and typically also feel less encumbered by the need to legitimate or justify their decisions in terms of the democratic wishes of the citizens they (for the most part) claim to represent. In conventional terms this is likely to prove depoliticising – in that political elites are likely to invoke the 'harsh economic realities' and 'non-negotiable constraints' of the exceptional circumstances

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in which they find themselves in defending whatever policy choices they feel it necessary to impose, however unpopular these might prove (austerity through swinging welfare retrenchment is a good example). In Schmittian terms, however, the authority, decisiveness and finitude with which friend–enemy rivalries are clarified, crystallised and resolved in such moments is deeply politicising – not least because the depoliticising pretensions of liberal democratic mythology are temporarily suspended (such is the nature of the exceptionalism to which Schmitt points). The imposition of austerity in Greece may well be deeply depoliticising, then, in conventional terms (as, for instance, in Jessop’s account); but it is deeply politicising in Schmitt’s terms (and, one can only surmise, those of Flinders and Wood).

## Rethinking depoliticisation

Wood and Flinders’ substantive contribution is very different from the introduction and, despite its somewhat iconoclastic title – ‘rethinking depoliticisation’ – is, for the most part, quite consistent with much of the existing literature. It argues, in effect, for a widening of the focus of our analysis of contemporary depoliticisation dynamics so that we might better capture and respect their ‘full complexity’ (Wood and Flinders, 2014, 1). Crucially, though, it makes its case for so doing on the basis of insights already present within the literature it ostensibly rethinks and recasts – notably the three-fold distinction between governmental, public and private arenas as potential sites of politicisation and depoliticisation and the dynamic interplay between these competing tendencies (Hay, 2007, 79) – rather than, say, by reference to the Schmittian conception of politics discussed in the introduction. As such, if it is compatible at all with the idea of a second wave of writing on depoliticisation (as per the same authors’ introduction), this is a very much more modest second wave, seemingly quite prepared to work with the categories introduced in the first. That makes it one with which I am much more comfortable.

Wood and Flinders’ contribution is cogent, compelling and well-informed and there is much to commend in it. Accordingly, my critical comments are of a relatively minor kind.

First, I have always been somewhat sceptical of the idea that the extent to which a theoretical perspective might capture the ‘complexity’ of the world it seeks to analyse is an unambiguous token of its value or sophistication. The trump card of added complexity is an easy one to pull from one’s hat, but I am not convinced that it always constitutes a winning move. This is because the purpose of political analysis must surely be to achieve some kind of analytical purchase on the subjects and objects of enquiry – here the processes and practices of politicisation and depoliticisation, especially in as much as these might become self-sustaining or mutually reinforcing in some way. That analytical purchase necessarily entails achieving a certain degree of parsimony. There is bound to be much complexity in the phenomena that attract our attentions, but our task has to be to cut through at least some of this to reveal certain general features of the objects of our analysis. Analytical purchase, in other words, entails a necessary simplification. The question then becomes how much complexity to let in. Once restated in such terms it is far from self-evident that ‘more complexity’ (or, as here, ‘full complexity’) makes for better political analysis.

Indeed, there is surely a second issue here. For Woods and Flinders are (here) entering the debate after an initial flurry of interest in the topic has subsided somewhat. Their

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'second wave' intervention has the advantage of 'first wave' hindsight. This undoubtedly makes it all the easier to play the 'greater complexity' trump card. First wave literatures are almost bound to cut through more of the complexity of the phenomena they analyse than their second wave counterparts. There is, I think, nothing wrong with that, even if the subsequent maturation of the literature is bound to let in a little more complexity. One can, in other words, welcome both – and I do.

That said, I rather like Wood and Flinders' chosen strategy for mapping the field of politicisation and depoliticisation processes. I think its appeal in fact comes from its simplicity – its parsimony or elegance, if you like – rather than its complexity or its capacity to acknowledge complexity, as they would have it. Indeed, if there are problems with their formulation – and I think there are – they come largely from trying to squeeze too much complexity into a relatively simple three-fold categorisation of the field of de/politicisation. There is much which could be said here, but limits of space confine me to three (simple) observations.

The first is that Woods and Flinders conflate, even if they do not confuse, a number of things in their summary table in which they seek to distinguish the three faces of depoliticisation (2014, 6). In particular, it strikes me, they associate too closely the mode of depoliticisation with the arenas or sites from which/to which responsibility is passed when issues become depoliticised. Thus, they associate type 1 depoliticisation, in my view, too narrowly with delegation, type 2 depoliticisation with privatisation and type 3 depoliticisation with the (discursive) denial of political choice altogether – when each might be seen as compatible with a range of different processes.

Second, it is a shame that the Lukesian analogy hinted at by the appeal to the 'three faces' of depoliticisation is not developed. For this would, I think, provide a basis for better conceptualising the linkage between modes of depoliticisation (or, indeed, politicisation) and arenas or sites of depoliticisation (or politicisation). Decision making, agenda setting and preference shaping can all, of course, be more or less politicised – and each might be seen to be associated with different types or modes of politicisation and depoliticisation. I see considerable potential in the further sustained reflection on such linkages.

Finally, though the concept undoubtedly has a certain intuitive appeal, there are some problems I think with the (present) operationalisation of the concept of discursive depoliticisation. For, as used by Wood and Flinders, at least in this article, the concept relates solely to type 3 depoliticisation – the denial, in effect, that an issue has or might be seen to have a politics since there is perceived to be no contingency which a political process might debate, discuss and thereby resolve. This, I think, is problematic – not because such denials are not themselves inherently discursive (I think they are), but because there is a discursive component to all depoliticisations (whatever their type). Thus, when for instance operational independence is ceded to the Bank of England for the setting of monetary policy this is as much a discursive depoliticisation as it is an institutional one; it is unhelpful to think of discursive depoliticisation as being involved only in depoliticisation processes of type 3.

Yet these are all modest objections to a conceptual mapping exercise that I find broadly persuasive, analytically elegant and eminently useful. Whether it constitutes a rethinking of depoliticisation is perhaps another matter altogether – but it is certainly a very valuable stock-taking exercise from which we can all benefit.



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## The link to political participation

No less useful – though also no less ostensibly iconoclastic – is Paul Fawcett and David Marsh’s important set of reflections on the links between depoliticisation and political participation. As they will appreciate, these are themes very close to my own political heart and it is refreshing to see them debated in some detail in this special issue by authors who have already contributed so much to their analysis.

It is perhaps precisely because these themes are so close to my own motivation for writing about depoliticisation that I find their opening observation – that the links between the literatures on depoliticisation, governance and political participation have been insufficiently explored – a slightly strange one. *Why we hate politics* (2007) was, of course, largely a book about political participation and one that drew me into the analysis of both depoliticisation and governance (and the relationship between the two). Accordingly, I see these issues, like Fawcett and Marsh, as intimately connected. I suspect, however, that we are not alone in so doing – and that Fawcett and Marsh somewhat overstate the size of the gap in the literature they seek to fill.

That said, what is most important here is not the extent of the oversight in the existing literature, but the degree to which Fawcett and Marsh’s reflections offer us new insight into these key connections – and, for the most part and with some caveats, I think they offer us a very great deal of insight. Their observations are helpfully summarised in terms of four key claims, each of which is worth discussing in a little more detail.

Their first claim takes the form of a warning – that the novelty of the term depoliticisation might lead us to exaggerate the novelty of the phenomena we use the term to describe. Or, in other words, that we are in danger of overstating the historically unprecedented character of the contemporary condition of depoliticisation. There is certainly something in this, but there is a converse danger here too...and a certain irony.

Fawcett and Marsh are clearly right to suggest that there is nothing new about the deployment by political elites of strategies of what we might now term depoliticisation. Politicians have always invoked non-negotiable external binds and constraints (sometimes genuinely, sometimes disingenuously). They have typically played fast and loose with their capacity to realise the wishes of those who elected them and, even before that, those without whose support their tenure in office might prove more precarious. There is nothing new about any of this; but that is perhaps not the point. Arguably, depoliticisation dynamics proceed rather differently today – in ways that it is important that we are attuned to. This is where there is a certain irony in Fawcett and Marsh’s contribution. For it is precisely by reflecting on the issues of governance and meta-governance that they foreground so effectively that we come to see what *is* historically distinctive and perhaps even unprecedented about the form (if not necessarily the extent) of depoliticisation today. The point is that depoliticisation has become institutionalised and ideationally embedded – in new public management theory most obviously. This is precisely why Flinders and Wood (2014, 135) can speak of depoliticisation as the ‘dominant model of statecraft’ in the twenty-first century. That is new, even if depoliticisation itself is not. So, yes, a sense of historical perspective is important; but that should not lead us to understate the alarmingly distinctive nature of our current political predicament.

Their second observation is that much of the literature on depoliticisation casts politicians themselves as the villains of the piece. This is an important point and

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one with which, again, I have some considerable sympathy. This is not least because, like Fawcett and Marsh, I am of the view that the disdain in which citizens seem increasingly to hold political elites is perhaps the single greatest political pathology of our age – and one that, unless held in check, may in time threaten the very legitimacy of our democratic political culture. The issues here are complex. On the one hand there are those who openly advocate depoliticisation and whose case for depoliticisation proceeds precisely (and logically) from the presupposition that politicians are narrowly instrumental and self-serving. If the presumption is valid then politics can only ever be the triumph of sectional interests over the general interest (à la Schmitt) and we should have as little of it as we can get away with.<sup>1</sup> Yet, on the other hand, there are those who denounce depoliticisation as a disavowal by political elites of the trust we place in them and who typically see political disaffection and disengagement as, at least in part, a reasonable (even rational) response to the resulting emptying of the content of the democratic process. As Fawcett and Marsh start to hint at, however, it is actually even more complex than this. For there is, in fact, quite a fine line between accounts of this kind and the castigation of self-serving political elites for the duplicitous appeal to depoliticising tactics and strategies to insulate themselves from criticism. The paradox is that such critiques may serve to reinforce precisely the impression that politicians are, and can only ever be, in it for themselves.

So how might one seek to chart a path through this conceptual – and yet at the same time, acutely political – minefield? Fawcett and Marsh pose the problem, but they don't really resolve it. Crucial, I think are the motivations we project on to political actors. If political elites are, indeed, instrumental self-serving utility-maximisers (the *homo economicus-cum-politicus* of public choice theory) then depoliticisation is the best we can hope for. If political elites are capable of exhibiting other motivational traits, however, then the scenario is an altogether different one. That suggests to me, at least, that in a climate of widespread and growing political disaffection (such as ours), we should be careful to avoid projecting instrumental motives onto political actors unless and until we have very good reason for thinking that this is the key to their behaviour. We should, in effect, give them the benefit of the doubt for as long as it is credible to do so. For the cost of not so doing, in terms of the potential for the demise of our democratic political culture, is simply too high a price to pay for our predilection to cynicism. The point is that we do not need to appeal to the instrumental motives of political elites in order to explain the pervasive depoliticisation we have witnessed. Altogether more credible, I think, is that political elites engage in depoliticisation not because they think it is in *their own* self-interest so to do, but because they have been convinced (and have convinced themselves) that it is in *our* interests for them to do so. They are almost certainly wrong in this conviction; and we need now to convince them that this is indeed the case. Calling their motives into question is unlikely to prove an effective means to that end.

Fawcett and Marsh's third claim is no less significant and no less involved. It is that the existing literature fails to give equal attention, in its analysis of political participation in particular, to political inputs and political outputs – tending to focus on the former at the expense of the latter. This is almost certainly right, though I have more problem with the way in which Fawcett and Marsh propose that we address this input-oriented bias – through an extensive engagement with the work of Henrik Bang. Limits of space prevent a detailed treatment of the complex issues involved here, so I restrict myself to two simple points. First, inputs and outputs, as I am sure Fawcett and Marsh

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would acknowledge, are interdependent not independent. Consequently, privileging the latter over the former (as, arguably, Bang does) is no solution to our problem. Second, and far more important, to my mind, Fawcett and Marsh are undoubtedly right to note that secular trends in political participation in recent years are not just about a decline in the use made of formal channels of engagement (such as voting). They are also about the constitution of new forms of political identity and subjectivity, typically in non-formal arenas. However important such developments are, though, they are no substitute for formal political engagement – not least if part of their appeal resides precisely in their non-formal character. Consequently, while it is crucial that we pay due attention to such trends, we cannot afford to comfort ourselves with the thought that participation has suffered not a secular decline so much as a change in form, when something very significant has nonetheless been lost.

Their final point is no less significant. It is that the existing literature has failed, in effect, to ask directly enough who has benefited from the process of depoliticisation we have witnessed in recent years. This, too, may well be right – the answer, such as there is one in the existing literature (and it probably varies), is implicit rather than explicit. But they are wrong, I think, to attribute the failure of the existing (first wave) literature to pose such questions directly to its discourse-analytical, constructivist and/or post-structuralist theoretical disposition. One does not need to be a ‘materialist’ (whatever precisely one takes that to signify these days) in order to think that the consolidation of systems of governance and meta-governance (such as might be associated with depoliticisation as a mode of statecraft, for instance) generates, reinforces, institutionalises, embeds and re-embeds significant distributional asymmetries. It would not be difficult to infer the character of such asymmetries, for instance, from the (constructivist institutionalist) analysis presented in *Why we hate politics*. Thus, to pick a particular and familiar example, the insulation of monetary policy in an operationally independent Bank of England has undoubtedly served to favour those with access to the housing market (and to the sources of credit thereby facilitated) relative to those in the rental market (in that it has contributed significantly to a low interest rate–low inflation equilibrium).

## Depoliticisation in and through crisis

Peter Burnham’s important contribution to the special issue reminds us of his central contribution to the analysis of depoliticisation, in particular his role in providing the initial framing and definition of the concept – a definition still used today. His piece begins by reiterating that definition.

Depoliticisation, for him, is the process of placing ‘at one remove the politically contested character of governing’ (2014, 1, see also Burnham, 2001). This is an important and extremely useful definition – and it is worth reflecting on it a little, if only to clear up a potential ambiguity in the literature. For depoliticisation, at least in this conception, is not really about an end to politics or an absence of politics or even some kind of quantitative reduction in the amount of politics present. Depoliticisation is not about less politics, but about a displaced and submerged politics – a politics occurring elsewhere, typically beyond sites and arenas in which it is visible to non-participants and hence amenable to public – perhaps even democratic – scrutiny. It is for precisely this reason, presumably, that Burnham can go on to suggest that the depoliticisation of decision-making processes may, paradoxically, serve to

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enhance political control – in that a politics conducted largely behind closed doors is less encumbered by external pressures and influences and more autonomous as a consequence.

Such a definition is extremely appealing, even if the process it describes is far from appealing. It certainly seems to capture much of the distinctiveness of democratic (or perhaps, better, pseudo-democratic) governance in western liberal democracies today. Yet there is a danger here, one to which I have already alluded. For depoliticisation thus understood is invariably a sinister and subterranean device used by political elites to insulate themselves from critique in order more effectively to impose their (presumably malevolent) desires upon those subject to their power. There is, in other words, a conspiratorial sub-text to much of this. To be fair to him, Burnham is quite explicit and unapologetic about this sub-text, not least in the present contribution – and in that sense it is, for him, less a sub-text than a text. The danger, however, is that it remains a sub-text (buried somewhere in the submerged assumptions about political elites) that spills over largely unacknowledged into much of the secondary literature which draws on this definition (and which may not share those assumptions).

There is also a second problem. For much of what we typically describe as depoliticisation does not fall easily within the terms of this particular definition. Thus, for instance, the delegation of decision-making discretion to a panel of experts is not a case of depoliticisation, unless of course one assumes that the decisions of such a panel are in fact precisely those that would have been made by the political elites who appointed them (or that they reflect a singular sectional or class interest). We are back to conspiracy again. The point is that it is not as easy as it is invariably assumed to be to disentangle this definition from the assumptions which inform Burnham's more general approach to governance in capitalist societies – and those assumptions, about the motivations of political elites in particular, are distinctly instrumental. Burnham, it need hardly be pointed out, is not very interested in giving politicians the benefit of the doubt; and in that sense, his account of depoliticisation comes close to the demonisation of politics and politicians against which Fawcett and Marsh (rightly) warn us. That in itself is not a problem; but it may well pose problems for those who do not share such assumptions, but who are nonetheless attracted to the definition of depoliticisation that he offers.

The implications of such an approach Burnham makes very clear in the present contribution, which is concerned with the relationship between capitalist economic crises and the process of depoliticisation. These he sees as intimately, rather than contingently (or politically), linked – and, for me, this is the problem. Indeed, in essence there are two problems here – a certain fatalism about crisis and crisis resolution on the one hand and an associated functionalism about capitalist reproduction in and through crisis on the other.

Burnham's fatalism, as I see it, is bound up with his conviction that during capitalist crises state managers seek, and can only seek, 'to re-establish the law of value while placing other key areas of policy beyond direct political contestation' (2014, 8). The problem with such a formulation is that it removes much of the political contingency (and hence, in effect, much of the politics) of the moment of crisis itself. Crises are, and can only be, resolved in one way – through the forcible re-imposition of the law of value (through austerity for instance) at the expense, of course, of the working class. Depoliticisation, for Burnham, is merely an efficient institutional mechanism for dealing with the political side-effects of such a necessity; though it is not strictly

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guaranteed by crisis management, it is almost bound to be reinforced by it, insofar as it is likely to make the restoration of the law of value a simpler task.

There are, I think, two important objections to such a view: that it is politically fatalistic and that it is functionalist (perhaps more accurately, dysfunctionalist). It is fatalistic in that it precludes the possibility that the global financial crisis that we have just witnessed, for instance, could have been responded to in any way other than through austerity. That, I think, is wrong. For crises are, I would contend, politically contingent; and, moreover, until they are resolved they remain politically contingent. Thus, while it was in no sense guaranteed that the crisis would be responded to predominantly through austerity in the first instance in a paradigm-reinforcing way, it was always very likely that the existing paradigm would be tested to destruction before any new paradigm might emerge in its stead. The point is that the crisis is far from over and that austerity (the forcible re-imposition of the law of value) has done much more to lengthen and deepen the crisis than it has done to resolve it.

That leads us to the problem of functionalism. For in this article, at least, Burnham simply assumes that: (1) austerity is the form taken by the re-imposition of the law of value in the wake of the current crisis; (2) the re-imposition of the law of value (here, through austerity) is a condition of the resolution of the crisis; and (3) since austerity is a condition of the resolution of the crisis there can be no other resolution (and, as such, it will come to pass). Each of these assumptions, it strikes me, is contestable. Above all else, it is far from self-evident that austerity is good economics (see for instance Blyth, 2013) – and it is certainly no functional fix for the crisis in which we still remain mired. One might well argue that austerity has already proved itself extremely dysfunctional in restoring the law of value. Indeed, one could develop this line of reasoning to suggest that it is precisely because crises are politically contingent that capitalist economies can choose responses to them (like austerity) which are liable to prove so economically damaging.

## Neologising depoliticisation

Of all the contributions to the present collection, it is Bob Jessop's which has the potential most to redefine how we think about and analyse politicisation–depoliticisation dynamics. As such, it is perhaps the closest to offering a manifesto for a 'second wave' literature on depoliticisation – albeit one significantly at odds with the introduction (whose focus on Schmitt it explicitly – and I think rightly – rejects). It is also, in a way, the most difficult to assess, to evaluate and to comment on.

The problem boils down to whether or not we need the novel conceptual framework he develops in the first half of his contribution to understand the dynamic interplay of politicising and depoliticising tendencies that he explores so incisively in the second. I am not convinced.

That said, there is undoubtedly a great deal of analytical insight in the second half of this article in which Jessop develops, all too briefly to my mind, a penetrating and original perspective on responses to the North Atlantic financial crisis (as he terms it). I am not at all convinced, however, that we need the conceptual armoury he develops in the first half of the article to reach these conclusions. That said, I am acutely aware that I may well be missing something here. For me, the three-fold distinction between politicisation, politicalisation and politicisation (and their 'depol-' analogues) that Jessop develops simply lacks the intuitive capacity to animate and capture something of its

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subject matter that I typically associate with his conceptual work. I can tell you what a Schumpeterian post-national workfare regime is and where you might find one; but I struggle to differentiate clearly in my own mind between depoliticisation and depoliticalisation – and I find myself genuinely unconvinced that they illuminate the substantive processes he describes so well.

More fundamentally, I see Jessop's chosen theoretical armoury as providing inadequate resources for conceptualising – let alone reconceptualising – politicisation–depoliticisation dynamics. Let me try to explain why.

First, what I find perhaps most frustrating about this article is its failure to engage with the existing literature on this topic. A great deal has been written on politicisation and depoliticisation, not least by those brought together in this collection of articles. Before building a new conceptual apparatus for interrogating the object of analysis of this literature, it is surely first necessary to consider the conceptual resources – limited though they may well be – already available and to explain, in a sense, how the new conceptual architecture relates to and goes beyond the old. Thus, although Jessop tells us that the concept of depoliticisation requires disambiguation he gives precious little sense of how it has been used by those who have deployed it to explore themes similar to those he considers here. That is a shame – not least because it makes it far more difficult to see what is at stake in adjudicating a choice between competing conceptual paradigms.

Second, and perhaps related, I think we should have a certain reticence and reluctance about advancing new conceptual schema – especially where the limitations of the existing conceptual resources have yet to be established. Were we engaged in a solely intellectual exercise this might well be legitimate; but where (as here) we are exploring some of the most pressing political pathologies of our age in the hope that we might contribute to resolving them, I think it is far less tolerable. That is perhaps a little too strong; but I would argue, passionately, that when we write on topics like depoliticisation – particularly when we acknowledge (as in the contribution of Fawcett and Marsh) the links to other political pathologies of our times like pervasive political disaffection and disengagement – we have at minimum a responsibility to translate whatever insights our theoretically-informed analyses generate into a language which is accessible to others. The creation of a new conceptual armoury is by no means incompatible with that, but it certainly doesn't make our task any easier. Here I remain unconvinced that the theoretical and conceptual innovation is a condition of generating the insights of the more substantive analysis.

One of the reasons for that is that there are some obvious problems with the categories Jessop deploys here. First, rather surprisingly given the characteristic range and breadth of the strategic–relational approach, the focus on polity, politics and policy, certainly as developed here, encourages Jessop to focus rather narrowly on the formal and governmental aspects of the political. The narrowness of this focus is made clear when he explains the links between the three fields he identifies: 'the constitution of the polity...affects unevenly capacities to engage in politics...and this in turn constrains the range of feasible policies' (2014, 2). This state-centrism is compounded in his definition of politics as referring to 'formally instituted, organised or informal practices that are directly oriented to, or otherwise shape, the exercise of state power' (2014, 3). There is nothing necessarily wrong with this formulation, but: (1) it is a much more limited and state-centric conception of politics and the political than that deployed by any of the other authors in this collection; and, consequently, (2) it

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circumscribes much more tightly than in the existing literature the field over which politicisation and depoliticisation processes might be seen to range.

Second, despite the title of the article, there is very little politics in Jessop's analysis – the depoliticisation he maps, charts and describes so well is in fact never repoliticised. We gain little traction on the question of what motivates political elites in response to this particular crisis to engage in the various depoliticising practices that Jessop describes, save other than a rather vague sense (consistent in a way with Burnham's contribution), that depoliticisation is functionally efficacious for them insofar as it insulates them from critique and facilitates the imposition of swinging austerity. We are, once again, in danger of demonising politics and politicians without first seeking to gauge a sense of their motivations.

Third, and partly as a consequence, Jessop's use of his own categories helps him re-describe in more abstract terms the response to the crisis (or aspects of it), but it does not contribute towards (and in fact leads him to stop short of offering) an explanation for that response. There is very little sense here of why any of this happened in the way that it did and what the points of contingency were in this process. In lieu of explanation, and in contrast to some of the more empirical contributions to this special issue, we are offered only abstracted re-description. In effect, Jessop's article generates a series of categories which he shows can be applied to the empirical phenomena of the depoliticised response to the crisis. That is certainly valuable, but it begs the question of causation.

## **Depoliticised governance as governmentality**

Emma Foster, Peter Kerr and Christopher Byrne's excellent and highly original article builds essentially from a critique of one of the core claims made early in Bob Jessop's article – that whereas politicisation involves extending the frontiers of the polity, depoliticisation involves rolling them back (2014, 6). This Foster et al challenge, drawing creatively and ultimately convincingly on Foucault's writings on governmentality. In so doing and without explicitly acknowledging it, they remind us that depoliticisation, certainly as defined by Burnham, is not about less politics but about a different kind of politics altogether. In effect, their article charts, details and describes the subterranean institutional and ideational ensemble (of depoliticised and, for them, neoliberal governance as governmentality) that has emerged in the shadows of an ostensibly (but in fact only superficially) retreating state.

Though I am no Foucauldian and do have some objections to the at times rather agentless, holistic and amorphous conception of change that it presents, I have very considerable sympathy for this article. It surprises me, just as I suspect it surprises the authors, that Foucault's writings on governmentality have not been brought before into the literature on depoliticisation. That such natural affinities and synergies had not previously been explored, however, arguably just makes Foster et al's contribution all the more significant. I have little other than admiration for this article — certainly as an exploration of the heuristic value of rethinking depoliticisation through a Foucauldian lens — and can, as a consequence, deal with it a little more sparingly.

That said, there are some tensions and difficulties within it which, though far from irresolvable, require some further reflection in the ongoing development and application of this potentially highly fruitful approach to questions of politicisation and depoliticisation. I confine myself here to four of these.

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First, I think the central claim of this article – that, far from rolling *back* the state, the advent and consolidation of a depoliticised neoliberal governmentality represents a rolling *forward* of the state – is over-stated and in fact in danger of distracting us from a rather more important point. Indeed, it strikes me that, rather perversely, there is almost something of a quantitative fetish at work here. Foster et al are so keen, it seems, to make and defend the (quantitative) claim that we have not *less state* (as so many of us have been fooled into thinking) but *more state*, that they fail adequately to detail, describe and defend (qualitatively) the much more important claim about the character and form of the (subterranean) web of governance that has grown in the shadows of the seemingly rapidly receding state. This is not a profound problem, in that it might easily be rectified in subsequent writing. What, however, this article fails to provide, while perhaps whetting one's appetite for, is an account of the state's changing point(s), mode(s) and rationalities of intervention. At the same time, it strikes me that the claim that there has been an 'insidious rolling forward of state power' is contestable. Central bank independence, for instance, may well better insulate (neo)-monetarist (or, in Foster et al's terms, neoliberal) monetary policy from democratic scrutiny and political contestation, but I do not really see how it represents a rolling forward of the state.

Second, there is something of a tendency in this article, common to much of the wider literature on neoliberal governmentality, to conflate governmentality on the one hand and neoliberal governmentality on the other. The term neoliberalism is not really defined and is used, it strikes me, rather loosely to refer simply to the pervasive societal, political and economic presuppositions of our age whatever they happen to be. This, I think, lacks precision and, in the end, makes it rather more difficult for Foster et al to identify the extent to which new points, modes and rationalities of state intervention have emerged, the extent to which they remain contested, the tensions within them and their consequences for those subject (directly or indirectly) to their effects.

This, in turn, contributes to a third problem – the rather amorphous, hermetic and above all agentless conception of the rise of neoliberal governmentality as an inexorable, inevitable and irresistible force. Clearly one does not need to be wedded normatively, politically or ideologically to neoliberalism in order to exhibit neoliberal rationalities – and this, of course, makes it much more difficult to account for the institutionalisation and diffusion of neoliberal norms and modes of governance. We do, however, need rather more of a sense of where they come from, how they have proliferated, how they have become institutionalised and also how they might be resisted than Foster et al seem at present capable of providing. Once again, it seems, the closest we get to this is a rather vague sense that depoliticised neoliberal governmentality exists and has become institutionally consolidated because it is functional for the perpetration of something malign and insidious. That clearly will not do.

Finally, and perhaps unremarkably, there is a very clear normative sense in Foster et al's article that depoliticised neoliberal governmentality is a sinister thing and a malign force – and that, consequently, something potentially precious and valuable is lost in the transition from whatever predated depoliticised neoliberal governmentality to what we have today. They remain, however, very unclear about the nature of this loss, and that, I think, is a major problem. In general, their depiction of politics, politicians (insofar as they feature at all) and the motives of political elites gives very little clue



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as to why we might prefer a more clearly politicised mode of governance to the dull conformity engendered by neoliberal rationalities writ large. That, too, will not do. If we are to repoliticise depoliticisation, as I think we must, as part of an argument for restoring a politics that is conducted in public and that is visibly deliberative (certainly more visibly deliberative than that we have today) then we need to be very clear about what it is about such a politics that is valuable and worthy of struggling for. Foster et al give us a very strong sense of what is wrong with what we have, but they currently give us very little sense of what we might wish to put in its place.

## **Second wave or second generation? Towards an empirical reappraisal of depoliticisation**

This brings me, with some considerable enthusiasm, to the three more empirical and substantive contributions to the present collection of articles. These are universally excellent – and they suggest to me at least that if the literature on politicisation and depoliticisation is to develop, as I think it must, it is perhaps best to do so by engaging in detail and a manner that it has thus far largely failed to do with a series of empirical instances (or cases) of politicising–depoliticising dynamics and to reflect on (and to seek to resolve) the limitations of the existing theoretical literature in the light of that engagement. That is precisely what each of these articles sets out to do and precisely what each achieves. Taken together they constitute a very significant contribution to our understanding of politicisation and depoliticisation – though one, I think, more consistent with the idea of a *second generation* of writing and scholarship on the subject rather than a second wave at odds with the first.

Given my sympathy for each of these articles and the considerable synergies between them, I will consider them together and in somewhat less detail than the more theoretical pieces reviewed above. Indeed, I will merely seek to pull out three themes – one from each article – which emerge from their empirical analyses and do my best to explain their (considerable) significance in the context of the broader literature.

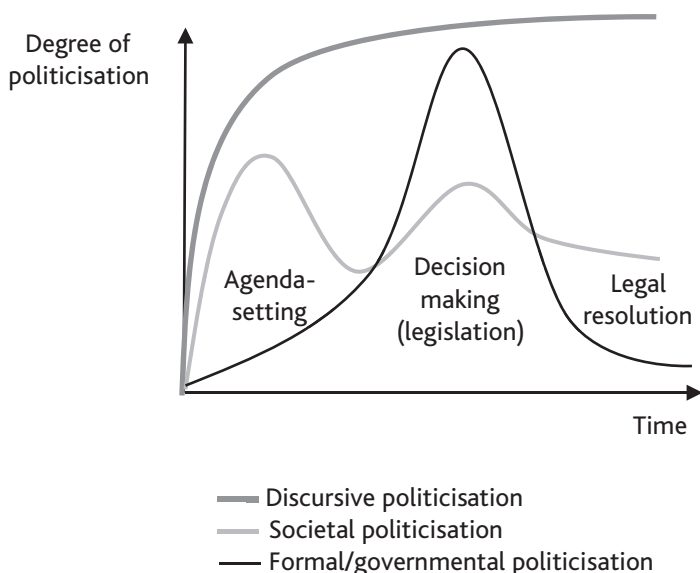
The first of these concerns the dynamic interplay over time of politicisation and depoliticisation dynamics which emerges most clearly as an issue in the truly excellent and, I think, extremely important article on the Father's Clause parliamentary debates in the UK by Stephen Bates, Laura Jenkins and Fran Amery. This article, more than any other contribution to this collection, charts new ground by opening up in a richly empirical way questions of temporality which have thus far tended not to be explored in any detail in the literature on politicisation and depoliticisation (save other than a few suggestive comments in the introductory article). In particular, Bates et al show – or at least hint strongly – at a phased relationship over time between the relative politicisation of an issue in different domains or arenas. I would suggest, though this is in fact not an argument that they themselves make, that we would expect to see the same phased relationship (or chronology) that they describe conserved (to a greater or lesser extent) between different cases. Their example, policy related to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs), is an excellent one in that arguably it did not exist as a political issue (a potential subject or object of legal regulation) before and until the birth of the first 'test-tube baby', Louise Brown, in July 1978. As such, Bates et al are able to chart the relative politicisation of the question of ART regulation across time from the first identification of the issue as political. This they

do, usefully deploying Wood and Finders' distinction between discursive, societal and formal/governmental modes of politicisation. Their argument can be summarised schematically as follows.

The birth of Louise Brown has the effect of generating a political space (a realm of contingency and potential governance) that did not previously exist (in that such questions of reproduction were previously deemed natural rather than social or political in kind). In this sense, the advent of ARTs is discursively politicising; it also has the effect of generating a regulatory vacuum and that, in turn, rapidly leads to the development of a societal controversy about how ARTs should be governed. As this suggests type 3 politicisation is rapidly followed by type 2 (societal) politicisation in anticipation of a governmental and legislative response (type 1 politicisation). This type 2 politicisation we might expect to take the form of an agenda-setting debate and this, in turn, we might expect to influence (albeit only selectively) the type 1 decision-making process. Finally, we might expect the initiation of a formal decision-making process in parliament to lead to a societal repoliticisation of the issue as the wider public debate is reignited by the formal political controversy surrounding the appropriate regulatory regime. Once this is settled, however, and legislation is passed, we might expect to see a waning of both societal and formal/governmental politicisation. Figure 1 presents an albeit stylised representation of that chronology – in effect the natural life-cycle of a formally politicised issue. The point, however, is that this is a chronology that one might expect to be replicated in other instances of policy making – and, insofar as that is indeed the case, this is a very important observation in the context of the developing literature.

Caroline Kuzemko draws our attention to a similar, and similarly overlooked, issue – namely the extent to which the pathologies of depoliticised modes of governance (here those issuing from the privatisation of energy policy) might themselves contribute to, or even serve directly to unleash, powerful repoliticising dynamics. This, too, is a rich

**Figure 1: The chronology of politicisation in policy making**



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and fascinating contribution. Her argument, cogent and compelling in equal measure, is that the effective loss of governance capacity associated with the privatisation and light-touch regulation of energy provision in the UK contributed to the instability of this depoliticised governance regime. For it exposed such a regime to the possibility (and, indeed, the subsequent reality) of repoliticisation through discursive securitisation – in and through which concerns (largely spurious, as it turns out) about the security of the UK’s energy supply (particularly its perceived reliance on Russian pipelines) led to depoliticised governance being repoliticised and (partially) reconstituted. As with the Bates et al’s article there are, I think, wider implications of Kuzemko’s contribution. For what her detailed analysis of this case study reminds us is that depoliticisation, whatever its perceived advantages to the architects of neoliberal governmentality, does not always make for good or effective governance – and, as such, it does not necessarily make for stable governance. Consequently, here as elsewhere, the literature needs to be more attuned to some of the unanticipated (but predictable) pathological and potentially even crisis-prone consequences of depoliticisation – and the extent to which these might themselves contribute to tilting the always precarious and dynamic balance between politicised and depoliticised modes of governance over time in one direction or the other.

Finally, and very simply, Ross Beveridge and Matthias Naumann seek to restore agents to the processes of politicisation and depoliticisation which, all too frequently in the existing literature (new and old alike), have been overlooked. They remind us, in effect, that all politics is made and remade by human hands and, more particularly, that despite the proliferation of global depoliticisation norms, resistance and coordinated local action can and does make a difference. Their article provides, I think, an excellent note on which to conclude. For while it might well be easier to see the human hands at work in consciously coordinated strategies aimed at repoliticisation (as in the case of the partial municipalisation of the Berlin Water Company in 2012 that they describe in some detail), depoliticisation too is the product of human agency. If there is a core challenge that remains for the literature on depoliticisation today it is surely to identify better, to describe in more detail and to explain more effectively the disparate and complex motivations of political elites as they continue to design and build institutions that prevent us from seeing clearly the political choices that govern our ostensibly democratic societies. That is no easy task, but in the final three articles of this collection above all I think I can begin to discern the route ahead for a second generation (rather than a second wave) of scholars working on these most pressing questions.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Of course, this is not Schmitt’s conclusion – but herein lies the path to authoritarianism that many have discerned in his writing.

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