Article:
Wamsley, D. orcid.org/0000-0002-7028-7890 (2025) Revisiting the theoretical foundations of depoliticisation: A Gramscian state theory approach for an era of crisis. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 27 (3). pp. 1001-1022. ISSN: 1369-1481

https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241305976

Original Article

Political Studies Association | BJPIR

The British Journal of Politics and International Relations
2025, Vol. 27(3) 1001–1022


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Revisiting the theoretical foundations of depoliticisation: A Gramscian state theory approach for an era of crisis

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Abstract

Despite voluminous research on depoliticisation, there is relatively little analysis of the theoretical perspectives underpinning the literature. Recently, depoliticisation has been reconceptualised as a contingent process examined at increasingly granular levels. While this contextualist approach has underscored the political character of depoliticisation, it has often neglected underlying structural and macro-political context. This article offers three contributions to depoliticisation literature. First, it reviews recent approaches, arguing that contextualist understandings of depoliticisation have narrowed the analytical focus of the literature. Second, it provides a comparison of two of the main theoretical frameworks underpinning depoliticisation literature, Open Marxism and Constructivist Institutionalism. It examines how their theories of the state, politics, and crisis have led to highly distinct understandings of depoliticisation and evaluates the insights and limitations of each approach. Third, the article proposes a Gramscian state theory approach to provide a macro-political perspective to understand the instabilities unfolding in capitalist democracies today.

Keywords

capitalism, democracy, depoliticisation, Gramsci, neoliberalism, state theory

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, growing areas of policymaking in Western capitalist democracies were distanced from popular deliberation and political contestation. This included the delegation of control over policymaking to 'non-majoritarian institutions' (Thatcher and Sweet, 2002), such as 'independent' central banks and supranational authorities, and a shift towards rules-based governance. Emerging alongside influential critiques

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Correction (January 2025): This article has been updated with minor grammatical or style corrections since its original publication.

by public choice and rational expectations theory throughout the 1970s, which identified the need for independent technocratic policymaking to circumvent the constraints of democratic governance in economic policymaking, Western democracies confronted the 'rise of the unelected' (Vibert, 2007), and a shift from popular to technocratic rule (Esmark, 2020). An influential literature described this shift in policymaking as depoliticisation. Peter Burnham's (2001: 128) foundational definition characterises this as a form of statecraft that seeks to 'plac[e] at one remove the political character of decision-making'. This describes how policymakers shield governments from the consequences of unpopular and often market disciplinary policies by transferring decision-making authority to less politically visible and democratically accountable arenas (Burnham, 2001, 2014; Hay, 2007).

Over the past several decades, depoliticisation has become an increasingly influential literature to evaluate policymaking and governance within capitalist democracies. While early analyses focused on macroeconomic policy in Britain (Bonefeld and Burnham, 1998; Burnham, 2001), scholars have since developed a range of typologies and frameworks to construct more precise understandings of depoliticisation, its gradations and logics, and the different levels of analysis at which it can be observed and understood (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Hay, 2007). Similarly, literature on depoliticisation has operationalised the concept beyond its original focus on economic policymaking to new areas of empirical research (Beveridge, 2012; Onoda, 2023). This has spawned multiple waves of research (Wood and Flinders, 2014), which have applied depoliticisation across multiple policy arenas, academic disciplines, and levels of analysis. Recently, depoliticisation literature has sought to address the escalating backlash against technocratic governance associated with the rise of populist politics (Fawcett et al., 2017; Scott, 2022). As factions on the populist left and nationalist right have gained political traction by re-politicising policies previously relegated to the realm of technocratic expertise, the literature has increasingly emphasised how politicisation and depoliticisation are contingent and interactive features of governance (Buller et al., 2019; Flinders and Wood, 2015; Warner and Luke, 2023).

Alongside these recent developments, there has also been a shift in the analytical focus of the literature, which increasingly understands depoliticisation as a contingent process to be studied at ever more refined and granular levels. While this contextualist approach has allowed scholars to reveal the constitutively political character of depoliticisation processes, some have identified its neglect of the structural and macro-political context behind depoliticisation (Berry and Lavery, 2017). As depoliticisation has been cast more narrowly as a contingent and localised process, there has also been a dearth of analysis engaging with the underlying theoretical perspectives of the literature. Despite voluminous research on depoliticisation, scholars in the field have largely imported pre-existing theoretical frameworks, deploying depoliticisation as an intermediate concept to examine specific dynamics of statecraft or policymaking. As a result, existing literature has not adequately explored how depoliticisation maps onto broader theoretical perspectives of capitalism, democracy, and the state. While some contributions have assessed the analytical foundations of the literature, they have largely focused on the levels of analysis emphasised by different waves of depoliticisation research (Wood, 2016; Wood and Flinders, 2014). In other words, much of the theoretical analysis has remained internal to the debates within depoliticisation rather than evaluating the broader theoretical frameworks underpinning distinct approaches within the literature.

This article seeks to further develop the theoretical foundations of depoliticisation literature and re-embed it within a macro-level approach. It does so by re-evaluating two of

the most influential theoretical perspectives underpinning depoliticisation literature, Open Marxism and Constructivist Institutionalism.[1] Despite their highly distinct theories of the state, politics, and crisis, little research has examined how the theoretical frameworks of these two approaches have contributed to distinct understandings of depoliticisation. This has led to an unacknowledged theoretical eclecticism in the literature, which is often comprised of concepts derived from constructivist, Open Marxist, and statecraft approaches. Focusing on the work of Peter Burnham and Colin Hay as two of the main exponents of each of these theoretical traditions, I examine how their contrasting theories of the state, politics, and crisis have contributed to distinct theories of depoliticisation. While Burnham's fusion of Open Marxism with statecraft literature has offered a highly influential understanding of depoliticisation as externalisation, to the extent that it relies on the theoretical tenets of Open Marxism, it reproduces a functionalist understanding that cannot differentiate specific processes of depoliticisation from the general imperatives of the capitalist state. By contrast, while Constructivist Institutionalism has demonstrated the value of understanding depoliticisation as a political *process* rather than a structural logic, it has underemphasised the macro-political dynamics of different governance regimes under capitalism, confining its focus to specific tactics and tools of depoliticisation. As a result, both frameworks have largely been unable to account for the systemic backlash that has recently emerged against depoliticisation. Recently, Berry and Lavery (2017) have outlined a political economy approach to depoliticisation. While their emphasis on the macro-political scale of capitalist development is an important rejoinder to recent directions in depoliticisation literature, there are persistent theoretical tensions within the frameworks that they invoke. To grasp the political instabilities unfolding in capitalist democracies today, I outline a Gramscian state theory approach. This framework understands the growing backlash against technocratic governance associated with the rise of populism as a symptom of a broader crisis of representation and a macro-political backlash against depoliticisation unfolding across capitalist democracies.

This article provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of the theoretical frameworks underpinning depoliticisation literature and seeks to understand how the intermediate concept of depoliticisation maps onto broader understandings of capitalism, democracy, and the state. Beyond clarifying the theoretical architecture of the literature and elucidating previously unacknowledged overlaps, tensions, and incongruities between its main conceptual frameworks, this theoretical undertaking also has broader implications for the politics of the current conjuncture. By understanding how depoliticisation corresponds to broader macro-political dynamics of governance in capitalist democracies, this article suggests that depoliticisation literature can offer an invaluable perspective for understanding faultlines driving political conflict in the present.

This article has four sections. The first provides a brief history of depoliticisation, discussing the influence of public choice and rational expectations theory in shaping an approach to macroeconomic policymaking and governance throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The second provides an overview of recent developments and omissions in depoliticisation literature. The third examines two of the main theoretical frameworks underpinning depoliticisation literature, Open Marxism and Constructivist Institutionalism, and evaluates the insights and limitations of their distinct understandings of depoliticisation. The fourth section outlines a Gramscian state theory approach to map the political conflicts of the present. The article concludes by revisiting the arguments of the article and its contributions to depoliticisation literature.

The rise of depoliticisation: Public choice, democratic overload, and neoliberalism

Contemporary approaches to depoliticisation emerged out of the crises of the 1970s.[2] Throughout this period, a variety of different theories provided the ideological justifications for depoliticisation, including rational expectations and public choice theory. These theories directed their critique towards the paradigm of Keynesian macroeconomics and the militant political coalitions of the 1960s and 1970s (Cooper, 2017). In the field of economics, New Classical Macroeconomics (NCM), and particularly the work of Robert Lucas, Robert Barro, Thomas Sargent, and Neil Wallace, advanced a lasting critique of Keynesian macroeconomics. It suggested that rational, forward-looking consumers and firms could factor in government macroeconomic policies into their consumption and investment decisions, undermining the effectiveness of discretionary Keynesian macroeconomic management (Arestis, 2009). More explicitly political critiques were advanced by public choice theory (Hay, 2007). Applying the assumptions of rational expectations theory to the sphere of politics, these theories suggested that capitalist democracies were defined by 'political business cycles' in which self-interested politicians implemented short-term, growth-enhancing measures in line with electoral cycles to boost their political prospects (Nordhaus, 1975). This created a 'time-inconsistency' problem in discretionary macroeconomic policy, exacerbating stagflation and undermining long-term growth (Barro and Gordon, 1983; Kydland and Prescott, 1977). Perhaps the most influential version of public choice theory emerged from 'overload' theses. These theories described how self-interested, vote-maximising politicians, budget-expanding bureaucrats, and militant 'interest groups' imposed ever greater demands on states, creating a condition of ungovernability (Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975). Overload theory advanced a 'spectacular and populist narration of the crisis of Keynesianism' that had long-lasting effects in shaping both elite and public perceptions of crisis (Hay, 2004b: 511).

Alongside the political ascendence of the New Right, these critiques contributed to a growing consensus of the *ineffectiveness* of government macroeconomic policy, the need for rules-based rather than discretionary policy, and a perception among elites that government macroeconomic policymaking was best left in the hands of experts that could arrest the inflationary biases of democratic politics (Hay, 2007). In short, they laid the foundation for a highly influential justification for the *depoliticisation* of macroeconomic policymaking. While depoliticisation was most forcefully argued by public choice and rational expectations theorists associated with the New Right, many of its central tenets were later adopted by a new generation of centrist politicians under the banner of the 'Third Way'. As Third Way governments came to power, they subscribed to a view of globalisation in which integrated and liberalised global financial markets compelled governments to realign economic policies with financial market expectations (Whyman, 2006). Indeed, Third Way governments embraced depoliticisation as the dominant approach to governance, particularly in economic policy (Burnham, 2001; Hay, 2007). In contrast to the crisis discourse of the New Right, it advanced a distinct approach to depoliticisation, predicated on the alleged unavoidable constraints of globalisation. This is captured in Hay's (2004b) distinction between 'normative' versus 'normalised' neoliberalism: while the former refers to the morally charged politics of crisis leveraged by the New Right to popularise neoliberalism, the latter describes a more dispassionate and technocratic politics of the Third Way predicated on the *necessity* and *inevitability* of neoliberalism.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Western capitalist countries adopted a range of reforms to macroeconomic policy that aligned closely with the paradigm of depoliticisation. The

most emblematic reform included central bank independence, which delegated monetary policymaking to unelected technocratic elites and was adopted by most capitalist states around the world throughout the 1990s (McNamara, 2002). Central bank independence emerged as a solution to the supposed 'time-inconsistency' problem in democratic macroeconomic policy identified by public choice theory throughout the 1970s (Hay, 2007). This renewed emphasis on technocratic policymaking also shaped government approaches to fiscal policy, which increasingly assumed a subordinate role to monetary policy (Arestis, 2009; Hay, 2004a). Prominent policy reforms included the rise of fiscal rules, legislative or constitutional restrictions on government borrowing and spending, such as New Labour's 'fiscal golden rule' in the United Kingdom (Burnham, 2001).[3] More recently, 'independent fiscal institutions', such as fiscal forecasting agencies, have assumed an increasingly important role in shaping fiscal policy and are often regarded as a check against the tendency of self-interested politicians to distort economic data and forecasts in line with electoral interests. Within the United Kingdom, for example, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has emerged as a paradigmatic technocratic agency shaping the underlying context of fiscal policymaking, producing official fiscal forecasts for the government (Burnham, 2017; Clift, 2023). While macroeconomic policy was a central focus, depoliticisation also became part of a much broader approach to governance in capitalist democracies. Increasing areas of public policy from energy (Kuzemko, 2016) to the provision of cancer drugs (Onoda, 2023) were marketised or delegated to independent experts, distancing them from popular political contestation, and profoundly reshaping the contours of neoliberal democracy.

The politics of depoliticisation: Recent developments and lacunae in the literature

The outsourcing of policymaking to independent authorities often gave the impression that depoliticisation was itself an apolitical act or a mechanism of 'removing politics' from policymaking by delegating authority to technocratic institutions. Yet as scholars clarified, depoliticisation was better understood as a form of 'arena shifting', whereby politics was displaced to different spheres of governance further removed from democratic processes, popular deliberation, and contestation (Flinders and Buller, 2006: 296). Indeed, the process of depoliticisation was itself a constitutively political act, which was based in part on actors obscuring their capacity to exert political agency.[4] In turn, depoliticisation could even allow policymakers to retain certain degrees of control over policy that had ostensibly been delegated away to market or technocratic forces (Burnham, 2014).

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis of the contingent nature of depoliticisation and a recognition of the limits of the rigid, rules-based prescriptions envisioned by its early proponents (Buller et al., 2019; Clift, 2023). This has become increasingly apparent in relation to the politics of fiscal rules in the United Kingdom, for example, which are self-imposed measures that are subject to frequent violation or adjustment by politicians (Strange, 2014), but which nonetheless continue to play a central role in fiscal policy.[5] As several observers have noted, it is arguably the *appeal* to fiscal discipline and credibility, and the extent to which this is leveraged as a form of statecraft, that is the most salient logic of the depoliticisation of fiscal policy (Gamble, 2015; Stanley, 2016). Others discerned a similar logic in the approach of central banks throughout the 1990s and 2000s, in which policymakers increasingly blurred their own capacity for policy interventions by deferring to market expectations as an approach to governing monetary policy (Burnham, 2014; Krippner, 2012). This has led to an increasing recognition in the literature of the

agency of policymakers and technocratic institutions in shaping depoliticisation processes and the importance of their capacity to obfuscate their own agency as a means of deferring political responsibility for implementing policies. As one recent analysis describes, depoliticisation may be best understood not as a mechanism of removing politics from government policymaking in toto, but rather as an attempt to limit specific types of *democratic* and politically threatening incursions (Stahl, 2021).

Alongside these more explicitly political understandings of depoliticisation, there has also been shift in the analytical focus of depoliticisation literature. This has included efforts to construct more refined typologies of the differing logics and scales of depoliticisation (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Flinders and Wood, 2015). According to this literature, the 'first wave' of depoliticisation literature had placed too great emphasis on *governmental* depoliticisation (Jenkins, 2011). Instead, the 'second wave' of literature theorised depoliticisation as a more diffuse logic of governance, observable on variety of discursive and societal levels beyond the state (Bates et al., 2014; Flinders and Wood, 2015), which is likewise subject to backlash and repoliticisation (Buller et al., 2019). While this literature has been criticised for its all-encompassing conception of depoliticisation (Burnham, 2014), one of its more promising interventions has been to emphasise that politicisation and depoliticisation exist not as binding institutionalised processes but rather are dynamic and interwoven approaches to governance (Buller et al., 2019; Warner and Luke, 2023). While the dynamic politicising and depoliticising tendencies of any given regime was already recognised by earlier literature (Burnham, 2006; Hay, 2007), this has become a more salient theme of recent research, particularly in relation to the recent rise of populism as new political factions have emerged in capitalist democracies contesting aspects of the neoliberal consensus (Bray, 2015; Hopkin, 2020; Scott, 2022). This has also coincided with a broadening of the empirical horizons of the literature, which has examined depoliticisation at a variety of levels and across various policy domains, from the role of management consultants in privatising water (Beveridge, 2012), to drug rationing and health policy (Onoda, 2023).

Despite the insights gleaned from recent developments in depoliticisation literature, there has also been an associated cost to narrowing its analytical focus. In a critical reappraisal of depoliticisation research, Berry and Lavery (2017: 247), for instance, note the relative neglect of the structural and macro-political context behind depoliticisation and 'the way in which depoliticization strategies are embedded within distinctively capitalist forms of social organization'. Alongside this methodological narrowing, this article further suggests that there has been a dearth of analysis critically evaluating depoliticisation's underlying theoretical frameworks. Scholars within the field have thus far largely imported pre-existing theoretical frameworks into their understandings of depoliticisation or have sought to use the concept in disparate ways without acknowledging its distinct theoretical underpinnings or clarifying how it maps onto prior understandings of capitalism, democracy, and the state. There is thus considerable potential analytical value in returning to underlying theoretical frameworks informing the literature and evaluating how they have shaped distinct and often divergent understandings of depoliticisation.

Theoretical frameworks of depoliticisation

Open Marxism

Much of the early literature on depoliticisation was influenced by the Open Marxist approach and particularly the work of Peter Burnham. Open Marxism engages with several long-standing themes in Marxist analysis. Marxist literature has long maintained that

the apparent separation or differentiation between the realms of the 'economic' and the 'political' is an historically specific feature of capitalist social relations (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978; Wood, 1995), which is predicated on the externalisation of the relations of production to a private realm supposedly beyond political contestation.[6] This depoliticisation of capitalist civil society endows workers with the ostensible freedom to sell their labour-power free from political and juridical coercion while nonetheless subjecting them to the compulsions of market dependence and competition (Brenner, 1977; Wood, 1995). Similarly, Marxist frameworks have long stressed the inherent limits of political democracy under capitalism. Despite incorporating working classes into formal democratic procedures, capitalist democracy ultimately shields property relations from political incursions, allowing for the rule of capital by indirect means such as private control of investment (Poulantzas, 1973; Therborn, 1977).

Emerging in response to the 'state derivationist' debate out of West Germany in the 1970s, Open Marxism sought to construct a materialist theory of the state that could transcend what it viewed as the limits of both structuralism and 'politicism' within existing Marxist theories (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978). A central feature of this research agenda was a theorisation of the relationship between the spheres of 'the economic' and 'the political'. To Open Marxists, politics and economics, and states and markets, were part of a 'contradictory unity' but were nonetheless artificially separated as 'distinct spheres of social existence' in capitalist societies by the 'social form of capitalist production' (Clarke, 2001: 9). A core function of the state was to separate politics from economics, thereby obscuring the antagonisms between capital and labour (Bonefeld et al., 1992: 160). As a 'moment' of capitalist relations of production, state power was forged in conditions of class struggle (Clarke, 1991). Yet despite being shaped by an ostensibly open-ended process of class struggle, the capacity and scope of the state was also severely circumscribed, and its integral function of differentiating the political from the economic was regarded as a 'necessary consequence of the social form of capitalist production' (Clarke, 2001: 11). Open Marxism thus emphasised the *necessarily* depoliticised social relations of capitalist production and the inherent limitations of political interventions by states under capitalism.

Open Marxism also advanced a distinctive theory of crisis. Capitalist crises expressed the 'structural instability of capitalist social relations' and were constituted *not* by the 'laws of motion' of capitalist development as in previous structuralist theories, but by the 'social process of class struggle' (Bonefeld, 1992: 159; Holloway and Picciotto, 1978: 26). Despite presenting as economic, crises were irreducibly social insofar as they were rooted in class struggle as an ever-present feature of capitalist society. Indeed, capitalist social relations of production were envisioned as a 'permanent process of crisis and restructuring' (Clarke, 2001: 63). Central to this process of restructuring was the depoliticising functions of the state, whose *raison d'etre* was maintaining the separation of politics and economics to impose competition, market discipline, and the law of value that shapes capitalist social relations.

While the Open Marxist approach, and particularly the work of Simon Clarke (1991), sought to move beyond structuralist understandings of the state by highlighting the constitutive role of class struggle, how class struggle can be operationalised to examine concrete political interventions of the state to depoliticise economic policies and practices is not clear. Instead, class struggle is often conceptualised as a totalising feature of capitalist society (Bieler and Morton, 2003), which is irreducibly antagonistic and largely unmediated by the apparatuses of the state (Jessop, 1990: 258).[7] The scope of state activity in

Open Marxist accounts is thus over determined by the imperative of separating the political from the economic, which is treated as an enduring and necessary feature of the continued reproduction of capitalism as such (Bieler et al., 2010).

From this theoretical framework, Peter Burnham developed a distinct approach to depoliticisation to describe how state managers and policymakers seek to insulate aspects of economic policy from political contestation. His early analyses focused on the politics of crisis management and economic policymaking throughout the 1990s in Britain, ranging from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (Bonefeld and Burnham, 1998; Bonefeld et al., 1992), to the political economy of New Labour (Burnham, 2001). Burnham described depoliticisation as a mechanism of externalisation. In this view, depoliticisation is a governance strategy that seeks to displace the visibly political character of economic decision-making (Burnham, 2001). Domestically, this included the delegation of economic policymaking to 'independent' authorities, the imposition of rules-based rather than discretionary policymaking, and practices that seek to externally validate 'sound' economic policy (Burnham, 2001: 131). Globally, this comprised efforts to tether domestic economies to external regimes of monetary and fiscal discipline, such as the gold standard or European Exchange Rate Mechanism (Kettell, 2008).[8] Closely bound to capitalist crisis management, externalisation was deployed to displace political responsibility for implementing market disciplinary or unpopular economic policies.

Burnham's externalisation approach to depoliticisation has become a highly influential way to understand dynamics of statecraft and crisis management. His emphasis on the relationship between policymakers, capitalist crisis, and the state admirably underscores the macro-political dynamics of depoliticisation, which has been noticeably absent within recent literature. There is, however, a tension within his framework. On one level, Burnham theorises depoliticisation as a *specific* governance strategy deployed by state managers to avoid blame for unpopular policies and shield them from political scrutiny. This theory of depoliticisation invokes the statecraft approach of Jim Bulpitt (1986), which foregrounds the party-political and electoral dynamics of governance. In this view, depoliticisation is a form of blame-shifting driven by identifiable political actors for definite political ends (Burnham, 2001). Yet, at the same time, Burnham also draws on Open Marxism, which relies on a more abstract general theory of depoliticisation. In this formulation, depoliticisation is a necessary function of the state, which reproduces capitalist social relations by reinforcing the separation of the political and the economic, thereby obscuring underlying antagonisms between capital and labour. This is both a general feature of the capitalist state, but also one that becomes more salient during crises. As Burnham (2017: 376) notes, the 'contradictory relationship between the "political" and the "economic" is understood as a core feature of the "social relations of capital"', from which depoliticisation emerges as 'an important element in the reorganisation of the state' in response to the crisis tendencies of capitalism (Burnham, 2017: 376).

Critics have drawn attention to aspects of these tensions in Burnham's work. Despite praising Burnham's (2001) analysis of depoliticisation, Hay (2014: 303), for instance, notes its 'fatalism about crisis and crisis resolution' and its 'associated functionalism about capitalist reproduction in and through crisis'. Burnham's conception of the politics of crisis management, Hay (2014) observes, reduces depoliticisation to a necessary function of the capitalist state to reinforce the law of value. Berry and Lavery (2017) have similarly noted Burnham's tendency to 'read off' institutional and political dynamics from an analysis of the circuits of capital. Although Burnham (2014: 194–197) has sought to reconcile these perspectives by noting how depoliticisation can be understood as a

mechanism used by state managers to shield the political visibility of their interventions to reimpose market discipline and restore profitability, these interpretations of depoliticisation as both a political process and a general imperative of the capitalist state ultimately remain in tension. Deriving from Open Marxism's diagnosis of the *necessary* depoliticising function of the capitalist state, Burnham's framework is incapable of differentiating these general and universal features of the capitalist state from concrete processes and practices of depoliticisation. Furthermore, by strictly circumscribing the space for political intervention by the state in line with the overdetermining logic of capitalism's crisis tendencies, Burnham's framework cannot explain periods of heightened political contention in which governance and policymaking becomes *repoliticised*.

Constructivist institutionalism

The other most influential framework informing depoliticisation stems from the constructivist literature and particularly the Constructivist Institutionalist approach of Colin Hay (2007, 2014). Conceptualising depoliticisation as the displacement of issues previously subject to political contingency to the realm of necessity (Hay, 2007), Constructivist Institutionalist frameworks understand depoliticisation as a *process*, which is observable at multiple levels of governance and is characterised by distinct gradations and logics. Flinders and Buller (2006: 310), for instance, delineate the 'principles, tactics, and tools' of depoliticisation, which they subdivide between *institutional*, *rule-based*, and *preference-shaping*. Hay's (2007) influential typology contends that politicisation/depoliticisation runs along a continuum from the realm of contingency to necessity and is configured by three interacting spheres: *governmental*, *public* (both government and non-governmental), and *private*, each of which manifests in a distinctive logic. These typologies offer an operationalisable framework to study depoliticisation in relation to concrete policies and institutional configurations.

Although seemingly complimentary with the externalisation view propounded by Burnham (2001), the Constructivist Institutionalist literature is predicated on a highly distinct view of politics, the state, and crisis. The primary objective of Constructivist Institutionalism is to 'restor[e] politics . . . to processes and practices typically seen as inevitable, necessary and non-negotiable' (Hay, 2016: 520). Its understanding of power attributes primacy to addressing and seeking to resolve *interpretive* ambiguities about politically salient policies and issues that become paramount in moments of crisis (Hay, 2016: 533). While crises are similarly central to Constructivist Institutionalist analysis, it is more so in relation to the dominant interpretive frameworks that condition understandings of crisis and enable or inhibit political responses to them. Crises are, in the constructivist view, the product of the interpretive lenses of socially and institutionally embedded actors that enable or prevent political interventions (Hay, 1996). Disavowing structuralist approaches within political economy, these accounts emphasise the *contingent* nature of capitalist crisis management, highlighting the role of socially constructed ideas in legitimising certain political interventions and configuring actor interests (Hay, 1996; see also: Blyth, 2002). According to constructivist literature, depoliticisation stems in large part from domestic political interventions rather than external imperatives invoked by politicians such as globalisation (Hay, 2007). This is part of a broader literature in constructivist political economy that evaluates the ways in which ideational power mediates interactions between structural forces and political actors (Bell and Hindmoor, 2014). The space for political interventions over economic policy and macroeconomic management

in the constructivist view is less impinged by structural crisis tendencies as in Open Marxism and is instead shaped by contingent ideational forces that are nonetheless interwoven with institutional and material dynamics (Baker, 2015).

Constructivist Institutionalist accounts maintain that depoliticisation is a political process observable at a variety of levels. Their capacious understanding of the political has allowed scholars to identify how the constraints and imperatives invoked by policymakers are often political acts predicated on contestable interpretations and assumptions. Yet, in focusing primarily on the discourses of political actors and the ideational construction of crises, constructivist accounts often neglect the wider structural dynamics of capitalist social relations and the macro-political regimes within which depoliticisation processes occur. While Constructivist Institutionalists emphasise the interrelation of ideational and material/institutional factors (Blyth, 2002), ideas are nonetheless often 'still treated as causes' and abstracted from the materiality of capitalist social relations, leading to a neglect of the 'underlying power structures promoting individual discourses' (Bieler and Morton, 2008: 104–105).[9] As a result, constructivist frameworks often cannot explain why some ideas prevail over others within a given institutional setting or social formation (Bieler and Morton, 2008: 104).

By focusing primarily on the tactics and tools of depoliticisation and the extent to which they allow politicians to obscure their own agency, constructivist analyses have often overlooked the wider balance of social and political forces that underpin different governance regimes and the conditions under which they can become repoliticised. While some accounts have shown how depoliticisation scales to broader political and institutional dynamics, including the solidification of the neoliberal paradigm (Hay, 2004a, 2007), Constructivist Institutionalism's elision of the macro-political dynamics of depoliticisation is part of a broader tendency within the literature to cast depoliticisation in narrow terms as specific processes to be observed at increasingly granular levels. Put simply, if Open Marxism misses the trees of depoliticisation for the forest of capitalism, constructivism is guilty of the obverse.

A political economy of depoliticisation?

Recently, some contributions have sought to fuse together the insights of both frameworks under a political economy approach. In their re-appraisal of depoliticisation literature, Berry and Lavery (2017) contend that depoliticisation literature has lost sight of the structural context in which processes of depoliticisation take place. They understand depoliticisation as an 'institutional or discursive tool to embed and shore up dominant models of economic growth' (Berry and Lavery, 2017: 245). From this conceptualisation, they outline a political economy approach, which includes an emphasis on: (1) the macro-political scale of capitalist development, such as production, consumption, and exchange; (2) the embedding of these dynamics within extra-economic institutions; and (3) the location of these institutional dynamics within political projects of statecraft and accumulation (Berry and Lavery, 2017: 248). They deploy growth models literature as an intermediate concept to situate depoliticisation within the accumulation strategies of capitalist states (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2016; Jessop, 1990). In Anglo-liberal countries such as the United Kingdom, this includes a debt-driven growth model often described as privatised Keynesianism (Crouch, 2009), which relies on a financialised approach to growth and social policy often called asset-based welfare (Hay, 2023). Rather than reading off depoliticisation as a necessary function of the state to reproduce capitalist social

relations, they emphasise the role of politically contingent 'extra-economic' institutions in the stabilisation of capital accumulation.

Berry and Lavery's (2017) insistence on returning to the macro-political scale of capitalist development is an important rejoinder to recent directions in depoliticisation literature, which has increasingly narrowed its focus to examine localised features of depoliticised policymaking. By situating depoliticisation within the macro-scale of capitalist development, while also embracing a more explicitly political reading of the institutional specificities and contingencies of depoliticisation, Berry and Lavery (2017) have outlined a promising critical political economy framework. Their implicit invocation of Regulation theory also provides an illuminating foil to Open Marxism. In contrast to the unmediated class struggle account in Open Marxism, Regulation theory's 'middle-range' concepts of the different 'regimes of accumulation' and 'modes of regulation' that mediate capitalist social relations over time allow it to zero in on the specific forms of socio-economic regulation that underpin capital accumulation in a given conjuncture (Aglietta, 1976; Boyer and Saillard, 1995; Jessop, 1990: 252–255). This historicist methodology also allows for a more sophisticated periodisation of capitalism and the different governance regimes underpinning it. While Open Marxism emphasises the depoliticising functions of the state as necessary feature of the reproduction of capitalism, leading to the unsatisfactory conclusion that there is little to distinguish postwar 'Keynesian' capitalism from contemporary neoliberalism insofar as they both depoliticise the underlying capital-labour relation,[10] Regulationist approaches allow for a more differentiated framework to assess governance regimes across historical epochs. As will be further discussed below, periodisation is particularly important for understanding the political consequences that can emerge in response to more or less depoliticised approaches to governance.

Yet in returning to the insights of Regulation theory, it is also necessary to confront its limitations as a mode of analysis. By focusing primarily on the stabilisation of underlying relations of production, regulationist approaches, as some of its proponents have acknowledged, have often devoted little attention to theorising the state other than as an institutional mechanism of stabilising the social conflicts of underlying economic relations (Jessop, 1990). As a result, critics have noted a lingering functionalism within the framework, whereby a given mode of regulation can be identified as evidence of capitalism's tendency to 'stabilise' itself in ways that affirm the theoretical presuppositions of the framework (Ryner and Cafruny, 2017: 55). Regulationist approaches have likewise been criticised for over-stating the discrepancies between different historical periods of capitalist development, ascribing unique features of different regimes of accumulation/modes of regulation to discrete historical periods (Brenner and Glick, 1991). In focusing primarily on the institutional stabilisation of a given regime of accumulation, it is not clear how regulationist approaches can account for parallel approaches to governance that co-exist in a given regime (Buller et al., 2019). Berry and Lavery's (2017) repurposing of regulationist approaches to understand depoliticisation as a tool to support growth models also overlooks the limits of growth models literature, which, despite its different iterations, largely remains wedded to a methodology of comparing national containers of growth and formal institutions that are often abstracted from the crises, conflicts, and contradictions of capitalist development (Bruff, 2021). In short, while Berry and Lavery (2017) have admirably sought to develop a political economy approach attuned to the structural dynamics of depoliticisation, there are theoretical tensions within the frameworks that they invoke. To grasp the macro-political foundations of depoliticisation in capitalist democracies and the systemic political backlash that has recently emerged against it, this article draws on a different tradition to evaluate the political contours of the present.

Depoliticisation and the current crisis: Towards a Gramscian state theory approach

This article proposes a Gramscian state theory approach as a way of further developing the theoretical foundations of depoliticisation and grounding it within a macro-level framework. There is a rich tradition of state theory broadly in line with a Gramscian approach that has theorised the interrelationship between capitalism, democracy, and the state. This article suggests that grounding depoliticisation within this tradition offers a generative approach to evaluate the macro-political instabilities unfolding in capitalist democracies today.

Aspects of a Gramscian state-theoretic approach can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci, Nicos Poulantzas, and Stuart Hall. Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* contains several aspects of a theory of the state, which is encapsulated in his concept of the integral state. This concept envisions state power as the dialectical unity of 'political and civil society', which traverses formal state institutions and broader social and cultural spheres of capitalist society, that is, 'private bodies' such as churches, trade unions, and the media (Thomas, 2009). To Gramsci, the state, particularly in the capitalist West, was not reducible to formal administrative structures or coercive power but rather relied on a complex combination of force and consent or what he called 'hegemony armoured by coercion' (Gramsci, 1971: 261–263). Breaking with Lenin's understanding of the state as a purely repressive apparatus comprised of 'special bodies of armed men', Gramsci theorised how state power also utilised more consensual forms of 'intellectual and moral leadership' that incorporated, pacified, and integrated threatening classes and contending social forces (Gramsci, 1971: 182). This was captured in his concept of hegemony, which describes a constellation of political rule in which a dominant ruling class exercises political authority and commands the consent of subordinate social forces by entrenching its *particular* interests as *universal* (Gill, 1993).

Struggles for hegemony became particularly significant in moment of crisis. Gramsci outlined a theory of hegemonic or organic crisis, which was formulated in the context of the rise of interwar fascism and the breakdown of the liberal capitalist order of the 1930s. This described a crisis of representation in which classes became detached from their traditional political parties and representative bodies, which often occurred after a failed political undertaking by the ruling class or a mass political upheaval from below (Gramsci, 1971: 450–451). In either circumstance, as traditional political parties lose their authority and consensus deteriorates, a stalemate occurs between contending political forces, which can develop into a more general crisis of the state (Gramsci, 1971: 178, 453, 556). As social forces vie for political power, traditional ruling classes increasingly resort to coercive force. In these conditions, 'the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic "men of destiny"' (Gramsci, 1971: 450). Gramsci's theory of the state, hegemony, and crisis provide a prescient analysis of the systemic fragilities that can emerge in relation to models of political representation and governance in capitalist society.

For all the insights of Gramsci's analysis, his work offers fragments of a theory of the state rather than a systematic account. Aspects of Gramscian state theory were further developed in the work of Nicos Poulantzas.[11] Poulantzas' (1973: 44) early work criticised Gramsci's focus on politics and ideology and outlined a conception of the state whose core function was described as a 'factor of cohesion between different levels of a social

formation'. For Poulantzas, the capitalist state, despite its relative autonomy from capitalist classes, had a functional role in stabilising the conflictual social relations of a class divided society (Gallas, 2016: 26–35). Nonetheless, his later work was deeply indebted to Gramsci (Sotiris, 2014). Particularly in *State, Power, Socialism* (1978), Poulantzas (1978: 129) developed a conception of the state as '*the specific material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions'. As part of a reconceptualisation of the state in relational terms, Poulantzas' later work understood the state as a strategic field of struggle for hegemony between contending power blocs in relation to the balance of political forces that crystallised class relations in institutional form (Jessop, 1990; Poulantzas, 1978). As Thomas (2011: 285) notes, this formulation was far closer to Gramsci's understanding of the integral state than Poulantzas acknowledged, conceiving of the state as a social relation or a 'material and institutional condensation of power relations between and within classes'. Yet Poulantzas' relational theory of the state was nonetheless incomplete (Hall, 1980). It remained wedded to a preoccupation with the abstract unifying functions of the state in organising long-term social cohesion in capitalist society that overlooked the unresolved character of political struggles over state power in specific historical periods (Jessop, 1990: 69).

One of the most influential Gramscian theorists to address the unresolved socio-political struggles over state power was Stuart Hall. A central thread of Hall's (1986: 29) work sought to develop a more substantial analysis of hegemony within capitalist society to address the central problematic of the 'consent of the mass of the working class to the system in advanced capitalist societies . . . against all expectations'. While hegemony was not an exclusively ideological phenomenon and was shaped by the 'decisive nucleus of the economic', one of the central insights of Gramscian analysis from Hall's (1987: 19) perspective was its understanding of how ideology 'articulates into a configuration different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations' in effect constructing '"unity" out of difference'. Hall (1979, 1988) applied this framework most insightfully in his analyses of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Famously diagnosing 'Thatcherism' as a form of authoritarian populism emerging from a hegemonic crisis of social democracy in Britain, Hall (1979) described how Thatcher was able to construct a reactionary social bloc uniting wings of the New Right behind conservative notions of nationalism, authority, and traditionalism with neoliberal themes of self-interest, competitive individualism, and anti-statism. This populist common sense provided the ideological and organisational glue that held together the political coalitions underpinning Thatcher's monetarist economic project, mobilising layers of the populace to secure popular consent for neoliberalism (Hall, 1988: 47; for a different view, see: Jessop et al., 1984). Hall's analyses provided crucial insight into the political and ideological foundations behind neoliberal hegemonic projects in the United Kingdom, contributing to a rich Gramscian literature examining different political formations from Thatcherism to New Labour (for an overview, see: Gallas, 2016).

What can this Gramscian state theory approach offer in relation to depoliticisation literature to understand the current conjuncture? First, it suggests that the political instabilities of the present are best understood as a deeply rooted crisis of representation associated with neoliberalism's depoliticised governance regime. Over the past 15 years, populist, authoritarian, and nationalist governments have risen to power or extended their rule in many parts of the world (Traverso, 2019). Prominent explanations in the literature often explain these political movements either as a socio-cultural backlash against social liberalism and multiculturalism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) or a rebuke of the economic

insecurities associated with globalisation and deindustrialisation (Rodrik, 2018). Missing from these accounts, however, is an analysis of how recent political upheavals can also be understood as part of a broader hegemonic crisis emerging in response to depoliticisation throughout the neoliberal conjuncture.

Since the 1980s, the dominant approach to governance within neoliberal democracies has been predicated upon distancing key aspects of policymaking from popular political control. Emerging from the crises of the 1970s and encapsulated in the diagnoses of a crisis of democracy within public choice and rational expectations theory, this approach to depoliticisation was subsequently embraced across the political spectrum (Hay, 2004b). While some of its most paradigmatic examples related to macroeconomic governance, it was also part of a broader approach to governing based on a distrust of 'the people', and more specifically, a hostility to the threatening incursions of militant political forces disrupting capitalist property relations during the 1970s (Cooper, 2017; Stahl, 2021). In response, a technocratic approach that sought to arrogate decision-making authority to the realm of experts and unelected elites became central to the consolidation of neoliberalism and was applied to increasing areas of social and political life (Hay, 2007), contributing to the 'hollowing out' of democratic politics (Mair, 2013). Reaching its peak amid the stability associated with the 'Great Moderation' of the 1990 and 2000s, the fragilities of this insulated approach to governance were brought into sharp relief by the global financial crisis of 2008. In its aftermath, political movements on the populist left and nationalist right have since become increasingly influential socio-political blocs across capitalist democracies (Borriello and Jäger, 2023), expressing a concerted opposition to depoliticised governance (Hopkin, 2020). Whether articulated in the politics of sovereignty and 'taking back control' on the nationalist right or re-claiming democracy from the billionaire class on the populist left, the politics of the present expresses a deep-seated crisis of legitimacy associated with the regime of depoliticisation.

Scholars have begun to probe the connections between depoliticisation and populist politics (Bray, 2015; Esmark, 2020; Fawcett et al., 2017; Scott, 2022). However, a Gramscian state theory approach offers a unique perspective to grasp the macro-political dynamics of the current political moment beyond the limitations of the dominant theoretical frameworks underpinning depoliticisation literature. While Open Marxist approaches conceptualise depoliticisation as both an immanent feature of capitalist social relations and an intrinsic function of the state downstream from capitalism's crisis tendencies, the political dynamics of the current conjuncture cannot be adequately understood as a derivative of these general tendencies. A Gramscian approach offers an important corrective in this respect. In seeking to develop a non-economistic historical materialist approach, Gramsci (1971) maintained that economic crises did not automatically yield political crises. While crises of accumulation changed the terrain of political struggle, hegemonic crises related to the changing parameters of authority, governance, and representation, which were articulated through political and ideological struggle and wider domains of social life (Bieler and Morton, 2008: 117).[12] This approach is crucial to grasping the rise of populism and the systemic backlash against depoliticisation in the present, which, despite being shaped by the context of the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath, can also be understood as a response to more long-standing trends associated with the hollowing out of neoliberal democracy over the past several decades (Hopkin, 2020). At the same time, a Gramscian framework offers a method to move beyond prevailing approaches within depoliticisation literature, particularly in constructivist frameworks, which focus on the localised tools and tactics of depoliticisation abstracted from the

broader balance of political forces. From a Gramscian perspective, crises of representation, rather than an event or a momentary phenomenon, can be understood as a *process* or a condition that expresses structural tensions in the balance of political forces in society, often taking decades to resolve (Gramsci, 1971: 399–401). It is at this macro-political level, this article suggests, that the instabilities unfolding in capitalist democracies today must be examined and understood.

Second, a Gramscian state theory approach demonstrates how the systemic backlash against depoliticisation today can be understood in relation to the shifting parameters of governance and legitimation that have emerged in capitalist democracies in recent decades. As the promises of stability and growth that had been a crucial ingredient of the technocratic governance of the Great Moderation era collapsed after the 2008 crisis, the terrain of political legitimation has increasingly shifted. This has been accompanied in many states, including within capitalist democracies, by a shift towards more coercive, and indeed authoritarian, forms of rule. A growing literature on authoritarian neoliberalism has examined how, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis and the period of economic stagnation, austerity, and escalating inequality that followed, coercive features of neoliberal governance have intensified (Bruff, 2014; Tansel, 2017). As Bruff (2014: 115) put it, 'in the absence of a hegemonic aura, neoliberal practices are less able to garner the consent or even the reluctant acquiescence necessary for more "normal" modes of governance'. This shift in the parameters of coercion and consent has included not only more overtly repressive practices to stifle dissent and police marginalised populations but also an increasing use of administrative and legal mechanisms intended to 'invalidate or circumscribe public input' and unshackle 'accumulation at the expense of democratic politics' (Tansel, 2017: 3, 6). Yet, as a recent literature has shown, authoritarian forms of governance have not merely been imposed from above but have also secured a growing base of social support and political legitimation (Traverso, 2019; Ward and Da Costa Vieira, 2024). There is thus a need for further analysis to examine how the politics of legitimation has shifted alongside the rise of nationalist and populist politics, which is being articulated into new political formations, particularly through the xenophobic politics of the ascendent right (Worth, 2019).

Gramscian analysis, and particularly the work of Stuart Hall and Nicos Poulantzas, offers a generative approach to understand these changing contours of legitimation and coercive governance within neoliberal democracies. Hall's (1979) classic analyses of Thatcherism as authoritarian populism captured how the Thatcher administration was able to strategically mobilise layers of the populace behind monetarist economic reforms by appealing both to market logics and by politicising social issues (crime and dependency, for example) that contributed to a broader common sense and reactionary historical bloc. By contrast, Poulantzas (1978), particularly in his later work, sought to understand how class forces are crystallised within the institutions of the state. In *State, Power, Socialism*, he offered an analysis of authoritarian statism as a 'new form of state' emerging in a specific phase of capitalism, which was defined by 'intensified state control over every sphere of socio-economic life combined with radical decline of the institutions of political democracy' (Poulantzas, 1978: 203–204). This included a '[l]oosening of the ties of representation between the power bloc and the parties of power' and a rapid concentration of power in 'tighter and tighter structures tending to move toward the pole of the government and administrative summits' (Poulantzas, 1978: 227).

Taken together, Hall and Poulantzas' analyses offer enduring insights on how the increasingly authoritarian forms of depoliticised governance adopted within capitalist

states interface with the realm of popular politics and legitimation. Bruff (2014) has outlined how Hall and Poulantzas' analyses can productively be combined to examine how authoritarian forms of legal and constitutional restructuring were accompanied by moralising discourses to shape the contours of post-2008 austerity. This analysis can be taken further to examine the current context. The current conjuncture is characterised by systemic political backlash against depoliticisation as a form of governance, which is increasingly redefining dynamics of political competition in capitalist democracies. Indeed, the dominant regime of depoliticised neoliberal governance faces a deep legitimacy crisis. Yet despite this growing backlash, there has simultaneously been a deepening and widening of technocratic power over increasing areas of social and political life and an inability to reverse the delegation of policymaking to unelected institutions (Thatcher et al., 2023). Within the realm of macroeconomic policy, for instance, the discretionary power of unelected central banks and technocratic policymakers has continued to expand in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis despite persistent attempts to politicise economic governance (Van't Klooster, 2022). Efforts to *re-depoliticise* policymaking by returning governance to the prerogative of unelected technocratic authorities by anti-populist forces remains a central feature of politics in the present (Moffitt, 2018). This was evident most recently in the response of the Bank of England to the Liz Truss administration in the United Kingdom, for example, which leveraged its unique authority over economic policy to shape market responses to Truss's mini-Budget, effectively returning economic policymaking to the prerogative of the Treasury, the Bank of England, and the OBR. The present moment is thus one in which there is a growing incongruity between the realm of popular politics, which has been characterised by a growing tide of political contestation against depoliticisation, *alongside* the persistence and deepening of the institutional power of technocratic bodies within the policymaking apparatuses of the state. A Gramscian framework is well positioned to make sense of this stalemate in the balance of political forces in the current moment.[13]

Third, a Gramscian approach recognises the coexistence of politicisation and depoliticisation as dynamic forms of statecraft, but nonetheless emphasises the importance of periodising dominant forms of governance in a given regime.[14] In light of the growing backlash against depoliticisation across capitalist democracies in recent years, literature has increasingly emphasised how depoliticisation is best understood as a contingent feature of governance that coexists with other countervailing tendencies and forms of political contestation (Buller et al., 2019). While this observation offers a more dynamic framework than previous depoliticisation literature, to grasp the political direction of the present moment, it is also crucial to examine the prevalence of one approach to governance over another in a given regime. This is central to understanding how and why governance can become more or less politicised over time, which has largely been unexplained within depoliticisation literature.

A Gramscian conjunctural approach offers a useful method to undertake such an analysis. As Hall (1987: 16) described, Gramsci's approach recognised the importance of examining the 'specificity of a historical conjuncture: how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create new terrain, on which different politics must form up'. A conjuncture can be understood as 'a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape', which is often driven forward by crises as 'moments of potential change' whose 'resolution is not given' (Hall and Massey, 2010: para. 2). Assessing the specificity of the conjuncture allows one to observe shifts in the balance of

social forces of a historical period and to assess directions of political movement. In relation to the present, understanding depoliticisation as the *dominant* form of governance in the neoliberal period is central to conceptualising the new dynamics of political contention that have emerged in recent years. The rise of populist politics, for example, arose in part as a backlash against the primacy of depoliticisation within neoliberal democracies, giving rise to both reactionary and progressive political forces seeking to repoliticise policymaking in different directions. Looking forward, a Gramscian approach can offer depoliticisation literature a valuable macro-level framework to grasp the dynamics behind the crisis of representation unfolding across different capitalist states today and to assess the conditions in which it may be confronted and overcome.

Conclusion

Recent research has developed more refined typologies to observe depoliticisation's different dynamics across policy domains on a variety of different scales, re-casting depoliticisation as a contingent and contextual process subject to contestation. While these developments in the literature have allowed scholars to identify the politics of depoliticisation across a range of new empirical domains, this article has suggested that there has also been an associated narrowing of its analytical focus, which has led to an underemphasis of structural and macro-political context. More broadly, I argued that despite the voluminous literature on depoliticisation, scholars to date have largely imported pre-existing theoretical frameworks, using depoliticisation as an intermediate concept without clarifying how it maps onto prior theoretical understandings of capitalism, democracy, and the state.

This article offers three contributions to current literature. First, it identified the insights and theoretical gaps of recent approaches in depoliticisation literature, arguing that contextualist understandings of depoliticisation, despite underscoring the political character of depoliticisation, have come with an associated cost of narrowing its analytical focus. This builds on the insights of Berry and Lavery (2017), suggesting that depoliticisation literature can benefit from a reengagement with macro-level perspectives. Second, it provided one of the first comprehensive comparisons of two of the most influential theoretical frameworks in depoliticisation literature, Open Marxism and Constructivist Institutionalism. I showed how their differing theories of the state, politics, and crisis have led to highly distinct understandings of depoliticisation. Whereas Open Marxist approaches, and particularly the work of Peter Burnham, have sought to understand depoliticisation as a necessary feature of capitalist social relations and crisis management, they have been unable to distinguish these general features of the capitalist state from concrete processes and practices of depoliticisation. By contrast, while Constructivist Institutionalist approaches offer a more operationalisable framework, their evasion of the macro-political dynamics of depoliticisation within capitalist social formations has cast depoliticisation in increasingly narrow terms as specific processes to be observed at increasingly granular levels. This article not only provides a clarification of the often incongruent and incommensurable theoretical frameworks underpinning depoliticisation literature, but it also shows the analytical value and limitations of prevailing Open Marxist, statecraft, and Constructivist Institutionalist approaches. Third and finally, the article outlined a Gramscian state theory approach to understand the unfolding political instabilities in capitalist democracies. By conceptualising the rise of populist and nationalist movements today as the expression of a macro-political backlash and crisis of representation associated with neoliberalism's depoliticised governance regime, this framework

offers an original contribution to depoliticisation literature and a way forward to map the political contours of the present.

As populist, authoritarian, and nationalist governments have risen to political prominence in many parts of the world over the past decade, including within capitalist democracies, literature has sought to identify its causes and determinants. In this context, depoliticisation remains crucial to understanding current political dynamics. Just as an earlier wave of critical literature identified depoliticisation as a central determinant behind the growing tide of political disenchantment throughout the 2000s (Burnham, 2001; Hay, 2007), the rise of the populist left and nationalist right today can be understood as the expression of a deep-seated crisis of representation emerging in response to the elite consensus of depoliticisation embraced under neoliberalism. Recent depoliticisation literature has correctly noted how the emergence of these political movements serves as an important reminder that depoliticisation neither removes politics from policymaking, nor is it an institutionalised process free from backlash and contestation. Less acknowledged, however, is the extent to which these rifts in contemporary politics have exposed the *systemic* fragilities of governing through depoliticisation. By re-evaluating how depoliticisation corresponds to the macro-political dynamics of governance in capitalist democracies and assessing its relationship to the balance of political forces across different social formations, this framework can offer an invaluable approach for understanding the faultlines of political conflict in the present.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Colin Hay and Andrew Hindmoor for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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Notes

1. Other theoretical approaches have also used depoliticisation, including Regulation Theory (Strange, 2014), and post-structuralist approaches (Foster et al., 2014; Jenkins, 2011).
2. Depoliticisation nonetheless predates the neoliberal period and has often been traced to the era of the gold standard international monetary system (Kettell, 2004).
3. Fiscal rules were also embraced within supranational institutions such as the European Union's Stability and Growth pact (Gill, 1998), and have since become part of a broader global trend, particularly after 2008 (Rommerskirchen, 2015).
4. As Hay (2014: 302) described, '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 nonparticipants and hence amenable to public – perhaps even democratic – scrutiny'.
5. As Clift (2023: 3) has recently summarised, 'Binding policymakers to the mast of fiscal and monetary rectitude is a more complicated, messy, contingent, and social process than neoliberal theory anticipates'.
6. Competing strands of Marxism conceptualise this relationship differently. For a critique of the notion of the separation of the economic and the political in capitalist development, see Rioux (2013).
7. Here, it is useful to recall Jessop's (1990: 258) reminder that 'the class struggle *as such* does not exist; instead class struggle is always the sum of specific class and class-relevant struggles occurring in specific conjunctures'.

8. Even ‘external’ sources of depoliticisation are refracted through domestic processes (Burnham, 2006).
9. Stuart Hall (1986: 42) provides an important reminder of the limited independent causal explanatory power of ideas, which ‘only become effective if they do, in the end, connect with a particular constellation of social forces. In that sense, ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership – in short for hegemony’.
10. This view is notably at odds with Burnham’s (2006) empirical research, which correctly emphasises how depoliticisation, despite co-existing with politicisation, can nonetheless be more a prevalent feature of a governance regime within a given historical configuration.
11. Bob Jessop’s (1990) strategic-relational state theory can also be understood as a synthesis of the work of Gramsci and Poulantzas.
12. Rather than abstracting political and ideological struggle from capitalist social relations, Gramsci conceived of ideas and ideologies as ‘material social processes’ integrally connected ‘with the social relations of production’ (Bieler and Morton, 2008: 119, 123).
13. For a recent Gramscian analysis of how to conceptualise such periods of political impasse and deadlock, see Stahl (2019).
14. This is captured in Burnham’s (2006: 304) contention that “rather than conceptualising a simple transition from politicised to depoliticised forms of management, it is more productive to analyse statecraft regimes in terms of the dominance of one form while recognising that it will inevitably contain elements of the other”.

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