Rethinking (De)Politicizations in Liberalism: Between Ephemerality and Institutionalization of Power

Introduction

Seeing the effects of continuing privatization and (de/re)-regulation of economic environment, we can notice an increasing depoliticization of public spaces and discourses. The interweaving of the public and private has become so intricate over the last decade that it is increasingly difficult to launch an offensive for the protection of public provision of goods and services - who to address, who is responsible, through what channels and by occupying what spaces/grounds? Is capitalism really just a monolith dominating established politics or is it a more heterogeneous network composed of both capitalist, for profit, mechanisms and non-capitalist, more hybrid economic processes? Within the capitalist rationality, politics is recognized as an unpredictable and, potentially, an antithetical force which needs to be tamed in order to be made predictable, stabilized and neutralized. This explains the establishment of the technical infrastructure, which transformed the previously (and directly) state-managed public services, into a devolved and fragmented network of private contractors for the provision and delivery of goods. Parallel and congruent to this, there is a process of “socialization” of population through biopolitical mechanisms of control and supervision. Although depoliticizing in nature, it represents the extension of the state governance, contradicting the much discussed view of the diminishing and limited state. I will address this paradox of de-politicizing tendencies through Michel Foucault’s analysis of the liberal governmentality, which positions these contradictory processes at the interstices of the market and the state, and Hannah Arendt’s critique of economism. This will help me demonstrate that the seemingly depoliticizing processes at work are in fact bolstered by political mechanisms within the framework of the market logic. The critical interrogation of the self-limiting principle of liberalism will expose the paradox of these depoliticizing tendencies that shows itself in the parallel biopolitical extension of state control.

In the second part of my paper, recent repoliticizations characterized by post-crisis popular uprisings will be first conceptually rethought in relation to depoliticization through the analytical prism of power, as understood by Foucault and Arendt. To address the two different modalities of power, one ephemeral and the other institutionalized, I will use Foucault’s ambiguous concept of counter-conduct. This way, the conventional binary between politics and resistance will be displaced and reconfigured so as to expose the common ontology of repoliticizations and depoliticization. Power has too often been simplistically portrayed as negative, leaving behind a feeling of impotence in the face of it. Power is also regularly conflated with terms such as influence, strength, authority and coercion – Arendt’s recognition of this disciplinary confusion and subsequent conceptual distinguishing of terminology will be helpful in this regard. The paper will propose a more nuanced conception of power which integrates both repoliticizing and depoliticizing dimensions. In my concluding remarks, I will recapitulate the main findings resulting from the theoretical discussion and expose the potential weakness of my analytical approach.
Diagnosing the depoliticizing tendencies of today

I place my analytical diagnosis of the depoliticizing tendencies at work in contemporary society within the framework of what Michel Foucault proposed to be the dominating governmental rationality of ‘our age’, that is liberalism. In his 1979 lectures, Foucault (2008, 2) set out to establish an alternative reading of government – as opposed to providing another theory of the state – which he saw was best described by the phrase “art of government”. This was his methodological attempt to escape the falling into the ontological fallacy of “all those universals employed by sociological analysis, historical analysis, and political philosophy”, such as the people, the state, sovereignty and civil society. The art of government is accompanied by a particular rationality, Foucault contends, that pertains to a specific mode of governing or exercising power. It appears to be all-encompassing, directing our thinking and practice, which makes it similar to another familiar concept, the Marxist notion of ideology, however Foucault explicitly counters this assumption (Foucault 2009, 215–16). Nevertheless, the very point of coming up with this whole new concept in political theory is to show that the exercise of power, or politics, is not just in domain of certain individuals, but it represents the very plural condition of all co-existing thinking beings (ibid., 282). Politics or the actualization of power manifests itself exactly when “the interplay of these different arts of government with their different reference points” (Foucault 2008, 313) unravels.

What, then, is the rationality that has guided the art of government in Foucault’s times and still does today? Foucault identifies it in broad terms as that which we call “liberalism”. Foucault understands this term in broad terms, going beyond its conventional usage in mainstream politics, and which also encompasses neoliberalism. From the 18th century onwards, “this new type of calculation [that] consists in saying and telling government: I accept, wish, plan, and calculate that all this should be left alone” (ibid., 20). This paradoxical principle of liberal rationality has been popularized as “laissez-[nous] faire” and can also be understood as self-limiting of government. Parallel to this, Foucault (ibid., 17-18) observes the emergence of “political economy” from the middle of the 18th century which marks the gradual establishment of “a reasoned, reflected coherence” between practices that were once conceived as “the exercise of sovereign rights, or feudal rights”, such as tax levies, manufacture regulations or regulations of grain prices, and were now managed by “intelligible mechanisms which link together these different practices and their effects, and which consequently allow[s] one to judge all these practices as good or bad” according to a new regime of truth (ibid., 18). But what exactly is the new regime of truth that decides between right and wrong, true and false that Foucault was suggesting in relation to the emergence of political economy? The point in which the liberal art of government, according to Foucault, distinguishes itself from the previous is that “its mechanisms, its effects, and its principle” (ibid., 28) are becoming more intensified and refined around the regulative idea of frugality (which gained a whole new dimension of significance in the last few years after the financial crisis of 2008 with the dominant policy direction of fiscally restrictive measures). And this idea of frugality dominating the art of government has not come out of “the heads of economists” (ibid., 29), but the market, Foucault says. The “natural mechanisms” of the market constitute “a standard of truth which enables us to discern which governmental practices are correct and which are erroneous” (ibid., 32). The general direction and guidance of the government is thus no longer functioning “according to justice”, but according to “the truth” of the market (ibid.).
This truth is supported by expert scientific discourses (just think of the professionalization and standardization of economics as a science and the accompanying developments in jurisprudence) and the institutions which produce it (university, the media, non-governmental organisations) (Foucault 1980, 131). The blending of the new liberal governmentality and the market interests thus results in the market dictating and prescribing “the jurisdictional mechanisms” (*ibid.*) that regulate the milieu of market needs.

Hannah Arendt offers a similar observation with regards to the emergence of political economy, which gains more significance in her critique of the blending between the public and, what she saw as, the realm of the private sphere. For Arendt, the public sphere represented a space of appearance for the articulation and concretization of ephemeral speech acts, whereas the private sphere demarcated the realm for our biological processes (she mentions menial work, reproduction, death and illness). She remarks that according to ancient thought, the very notion of “political economy” is a contradiction in terms, as economy or “the affairs of the household” is an inherently non-political, and thus private, activity, as opposed to the political (Arendt 1958, 29). With the “rise of ‘the household’ (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm”, “the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself” (*ibid.*, 33). The theoretical emphasis on *zoe* and the life process in Arendt’s *The Human Condition* does make us think whether she was also describing the same phenomenon that Foucault termed “biopolitics”, one of the pivots of the (neo)liberal governmentality: “with the emergence of mass society, the realm of the social has finally, after several centuries of development, reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength” (Arendt 1958, 41). In a similar fashion, Foucault identified this biopolitical development as “the doubling” of members of a given politico-legal community which appears as “a *population* that a government must manage” (Foucault 2008, 22), and alongside the emergence of political economy and the self-limiting principle of government as “part of something much larger, which [is] this new governmental reason” (*ibid.*), namely liberalism. Arendt saw the biopolitical life process as the epitome of ‘the modern age’, consuming the public sphere and replacing its political character with “the social”.

Compared to the ancient Greek striving for *bios*, fulfilled political life, the modern emphasis on citizenship (as membership in a ‘mass of bodies’) inscribes bare life into the public sphere which continuously renegotiates the once strict separation between political and non-political life. The “socialization” of even the private spheres of life is done by political processes that depoliticize the public sphere and trivialize it to the extent that it loses its originary political character. Arendt (1958, 45) described this phenomena as the “devouring” of the public spaces by the rise of the consumerist society, without which we cannot fully understand the depoliticizing tendencies of the “socialization” process. The loss of the politicity of public spaces becomes more apparent when members of society fail or refuse to follow the prescribed ways of conducting themselves duly. It is then that the depoliticizing processes of biopolitics demonstrate the coercive side of society and from those who are managing it. An example of this could be seen in the authorities’ response to a student protest in December 2013 against the closure of the University of London Union (ULU) in London (Grove 2013). After the plans by the management were unveiled to dismantle the federal student union, the students decided to occupy the headquarters of the university’s management. The police was called to step in and the protest ended in violent scuffling and arrests. Throughout their year at the university, students hear a lot about improving and accommodating their “student
experience” through different surveys, events, workshops and the like. However, when students did something other than fulfilling their duties as good consumers – this image has been accentuated even more after the tripling of the tuition fees in England and Wales as a result of the Conservative government’s frugal approach to governing – the forces of “peace and order” were swiftly called to the site to tame the unruly students back into assigned patterns of appropriate conduct. This shows the fine cooperation, or rather alignment of interests, between the state enforcement institutions and the commercial corporate bodies. It also points towards the conditional accessibility of the university’s offices, the purpose of which, at least in theory, is to serve their students’ interests. Increasing commercialization and professionalization of universities’ managements around the country has led to the alienation of universities’ interest away from those of students. Or to be more precise, the development of liberal governmentality was successful in reshaping the once politically radical notion of being a student towards a more acceptable subjectivity form that befits the depoliticized spaces of consumerist society.

At this point of the debate, we can see a paradox emerging in our conceptualization of the liberal governmentality, of the way politics is done and economic concerns becoming ever more significant in public life. On the one hand, we speak of the frugality of (neo)liberalism, and on the other, the rise of mass society is extending the biopolitical control of the state. The predominance of the “household mentality” and the overtaking of the governmentality by the economistic rationality marks significant depoliticizing tendencies in the modern society. The ‘socialization’ of the public sphere, however, expands the biopolitical control of “citizens” and “members of society” which are appropriately counted, classified and grouped inside the whole that we call the ‘population’. Foucault (2008, 28) notes these contradictory developments and remarks it is:

not without a number of paradoxes, since during this period of frugal government, which was inaugurated in the eighteenth century and is no doubt still not behind us, we see both the intensive and extensive development of governmental practice, along with the negative effects, with the resistances and revolts which we know are directed precisely against the invasive intrusions of a government which nevertheless claims to be and is supposed to be frugal.

Against this contextual mapping of the liberal rationality, we can understand how seemingly depoliticizing processes are executed and functioning in congruence with contemporary reconfiguring of the logic of what politics is and is able to do. Depoliticization is being supported and sanctioned by decisions that are very much political - being carried out by representatives who are elected at periodic elections to act in the interest of ‘the general public’. At least that is the idea of how a liberal democracy is supposed to run. However, the dominant governmental rationality of today, as Foucault instructs us, displaces the once self-evident categories of democratic politics and directs its followers towards one specific mode of conduct. With this also comes the rearrangement and shifting of distinctions between the private and public, state and non-state, capitalist and autonomous ways of production. There are two sets of questions that arise here which I will answer attempt to answer in relation to the next section of the the paper on repoliticization: (1) Is depoliticization of politics not an inevitable process? If it is, how should we then think politics in light of this formulation? (2) And is liberalism the only form of depoliticization that we can identify in contemporary human history? If not, what makes it so remarkable?
(Re) politicization and power

The financial crisis of 2008, however, presented an opening of possibility for critique of the liberal democratic and capitalist system. What the “political economy of truth” (Foucault 1980, 131) was proselytizing as right and natural came under question with the breakdown of the world financial system. Interestingly enough, it took until 2011 for the first anti-establishment protest movements to emerge around the world. This delay in mobilized resistance can be explained by the preceding period when the dominant prescription to ailing economies was in the process of hegemonization. As has become clear by now, the neoliberal antidote to the crisis comprised of fiscally restrictive policies (austerity measures, balancing of public budgets, structural reforms and privatizations of state assets), supported by technocratic institutions, such as the European Commission, European Central Bank (ECB) the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹ The initial effects of these socially destructive legal measures started to be felt only a year or two after their adoption. By 2011 and in the spirit of the Arab Spring, resistance to the establishment started to grow and mobilize on the streets and public squares, from Los Indignados in Spain, Syntagma square protests in Greece, popular uprisings in Slovenia and to the Occupy movements of different sizes all across the world. The purpose of this paper is not to offer another descriptive account of these repoliticizing forces, but to think in relation to their cause of emergence, the ossification of formal politics and democratic procedures. In order to undertake this critical endeavour, I will use the concept of power as the analytical prism through which we can rethink depoliticization and repoliticization and, more importantly, the relation between the two. Only by talking about resistance and politics as two different modes of the same ontology, that is power, we can understand in more depth the relation between depoliticization and repoliticization. This inquiry will also, hopefully, contribute, to a rethinking of what we understand as politics or the political.

In order to start making sense of this shift(ing) between depoliticization and (re) politicization, we need to first clarify what the ambiguous notion of power entails. I will turn to the two authors who come to mind and who happen to be the authorities on theorizing the dynamics of power: Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Only with the publication of Foucault’s work and that of Arendt (although her work was given far less attention in this respect), the limited conception of power that had been in use until then was finally challenged and conceptualized in novel ways. While Arendt studies power through its relation with politics, Foucault proposes an alternative method. Instead of starting from the perspective of the exercise of power, his approach takes “forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point” (Foucault 1982, 210–11). This distinction in the methodological focus of the two authors’ approaches sheds light on different aspects and manifestations of power, which is why such a joint critical analysis can produce a more nuanced view of this elusive, yet ever-present phenomenon in human relations.

¹ More on the analysis of the effects of austerity policies can be found in Busch et al. 2013.
Although Foucault is not as rigorous and meticulous in analysing the technologies of resistance in his idiosyncratic genealogical fashion, at least not as explicitly as he is in analysing the technologies of domination (Best & Kellner 1991), in the lectures that he gave at the Collège de France and which were only translated more recently, he constructs an interesting genealogy of resistances to pastoral conduct in the middle ages. By focusing on particular points of resistant practices and ways of (self-)governing, Foucault (2009, 194–201) coins a new term “counter-conducts” to describe the resistances that challenged the dominant pastoral authority by late Middle Ages and expressed a desire to be governed differently. The approach Foucault uses in documenting these counter-conducts could be described as a “genealogy of reversals”. Arendt’s starting point is more philosophically classical - she turns to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and accordingly draws clear lines between what she deems political and anti-political. Her approach is to develop a conception of power in constant relation to her understanding of politics. It is inherently performative as it emphasizes the potentiality and actualization of deeds and words in public spaces - in this sense, power is not pictured in the conventional negative form, despite its contours with politics, but as potential empowerment of communities and groups of people.

**Foucault and power**

In his March lecture of 1979, Foucault (2008, 186) states, “[t]he term itself, power, does no more than designate a [domain] of relations which are entirely still to be analyzed, and what I have proposed to call governmentalty, that is to say, the way in which one conducts the conduct of men, is no more than a proposed analytical grid for these relations of power”. Foucault (1982, 216) acknowledges the fact that the term power has attained the status of “a mysterious substance” due to it not being interrogated enough. What this mystification of the term power leads to is “a kind of fatalism” (ibid.). He, thus, proceeds his analysis within the framework of two questions that he poses to work towards the demystification of the term: (1) By what means is power exercised; and (2) “[w]hat happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others” (ibid.)?

The classical structures of power, in the forms of the State, rule of law and institutional domination, have dominated the traditional approaches to studying power. Although Foucault also talks about the structures and mechanisms of power in his work, he is more interested in relations of power. While Foucault recognizes and acknowledges the significance of power sturctures when trying to understand power, he sees them more as “the terminal forms power takes” (Foucault 1978, 92). The state apparatus represents the “general design or institutional crystalization” of relations of power (ibid., 93). By reformulating power, Foucault adds dynamic vitalism to the interrelationality of power. Power is not fixed, as previously presumed, in “superstructural positions”, but has a “directly productive role” (ibid., 94). For Foucault, power is not something you possess, an understanding which is very common in the classical Dahlian conception, but consists of relationships between individuals or groups. Power also does not come from the top, but from below: “that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix”, there is “no such duality” (ibid., 94). This seemingly naive statement - how can there be no such duality or binary when abuses of power are part of everyday political life, at least in the limited, formal institutional sense - will make more sense when we welcome into our analysis Arendt’s conception of power and Weber’s understanding of charisma. Before I turn to Arendt, let me just finish putting together the exposition of Foucault’s multifaceted matrices
of power. Along with relations of power, Foucault also identifies relationships of communication, through which run “the production and circulation of elements of meaning” (ibid., 217), and what he understands as objective capacities, so power more conventionally understood as bodily strength or an effect of external instruments. He does not see the three as separate domains, but as inter-connected and mutually dependent (ibid., 218). When addressing the two questions that he poses to himself, we need to approach them by not looking to power itself, but at power relations. This what makes Foucault’s approach to the question of power paradigmatically different to the classical conception (ibid., 219):

[S]omething called Power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures.

To emphasize again, power is not a possession, but a potentiality through action. Power relations can also act as a restriction, a limitation to our capability of acting. For Foucault (ibid., 220), the exercise of power:

is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action.

Arendt and power

Arendt goes in a similar direction in her analysis of power by underlining the role of action. Like Foucault, Arendt was not satisfied with the conventional understanding of power as necessarily negative in terms of constraint and violence. She was saddened at the state of political science at the time when she realized that academic literature did not distinguish among “such keywords as ‘power,’ ‘strength,’ ‘force,’ ‘authority,’ and, finally, ‘violence’” (Arendt 1969, 142). Behind what she saw as “the apparent confusion”, she believed there was “a firm conviction” that these distinctions are insignificant in light of the seemingly “most crucial political issue”, that is, “Who rules Whom?” (ibid., 142–3):

Power, strength, force, authority, violence – these are but words to indicate the means by which man rules over man; they are held to be synonyms because they have the same function. It is only after one ceases to reduce public affairs to the business of dominion that the original data in the realm of human affairs will appear, or rather, reappear, in their authentic diversity.

In her book The Human Condition, Arendt challenges the traditional understanding of power when she argues that “nothing in our history has been so short-lived as trust in power”, and in the modern age, nothing “more common than the conviction that “power corrupts” (Arendt 1958, 203–4). Her innovative conceptualization of power, closely knit around her understanding of politics, was clearly aimed at dissuading from taking a negative view of power. She successfully accomplishes that by constructing a vitalist account of power which diminishes as soon as the materiality of bodies in spaces of appearance disperses. For Arendt, power is a potentiality which can only be kept alive by the exchange of “word and
indeed” (*ibid.*, 200). Here, Foucault’s assertion about the absence of the traditionally entrenched duality between the ruled and the rulers is further reinforced by Arendt’s conception of power. In moments of popular upheaval, where true power lies becomes vividly evident when the ruling elites, which are thought to possess political power, are rattled by the sudden force of anti-establishment movements. Such popular power, however, persists only so long as the people persist in public spaces and stay united under a common cause. It is worth pointing out that Arendt makes the distinction between collective power, power in concert, and individual power, for which she uses a different word, “strength”, an inherent property that “unequivocally designates something in the singular, an individual entity” (Arendt 1969, 143). The inter-relational aspect of power is what makes Foucault’s and Arendt’s conceptions of power similar; where they diverge, however, is when we draw a line between individuality and collectivity. For Arendt, power is an inherently collective phenomenon, whereas for Foucault it is more individual.

**Understanding politics/resistance as power through (counter)conduct**

Now that I have laid out some conceptual clarifications of the notion of power with the help of Foucault and Arendt, I will bring back into discussion two other equally significant terms in political theory and science: politics and resistance. I have to make clear at this point that for me politics and resistance represent two different modalities of the same ontology, phenomenon. If we take the two notions at their face-value or their general meaning, then such a statement does not make sense, as we would normally understand the two as antithetical. But we have to recognize - and this will become clearer by the end of my paper - that resistance is just another form of politics. This formulation has been gaining ground in the late 1990s and even more so in the years before and during the financial crisis of 2008. We can find similar attempts at reconceptualizing politics in Chantal Mouffe’s distinction between “(post)politics” and “the political” (Mouffe 2005), or in Jacques Rancière (1999; 2010), analytically separating “the police” from “politics”. For the purpose of this paper, let’s understand politics in its formal institutional, or liberal democratic sense, and resistance as a protest movement that is ultimately ephemeral. If we would have to talk about the two in terms of their effects in contemporary society, we could comfortably argue that liberal democratic politics today is characteristically depoliticizing and protest movements repoliticizing. To simplify the analytical framework for (re)thinking the relationship between depoliticization and repoliticization, or in other words, politics and resistance, theoretical unwrapping of Foucault’s peculiar concept of counter-conduct can be of great help here. It will enable me to avoid falling into the analytical trap of reproducing the entrenched binary between politics and resistance, while exposing the overlapping internal contradictions that each of them conceals.

Foucault intentionally uses the word “conduct” for its benefit of ambiguity. It signifies the act of governing others or oneself. It encompasses the dimension of domination or discipline, both in the political (conducting others) and ethical (conducting oneself) sense. The term “counter-conduct” therefore retains the ambiguity of “conduct”, but articulates a desire to be governed differently and thus offers an alternative form of conduct. Although Foucault (2009, 195–96) maintains that for him counter-conduct is ontologically distinct from “political revolts against power exercised by a form of sovereignty” and from “economic revolts against power” in its form and objective, he does acknowledge that resistances of conduct are “non-autonomous” in the sense that they are not “separate or isolated from each other”, but
are “always, or almost always, linked to other conflicts and problems”. Another way of understanding these actualizations of power or counter-conducts would be in the language of (re)politicizations. The key element to these ephemeral processes is the elusive concept of power. Only through actualizing the potentiality of power, new political subjectivities are formed that challenge the dominant ways of conduct.

I will now turn to the question that Foucault raises at the beginning of his lecture on (counter-)conduct where he formulates revolts of conduct as conducting and address the close relationship of variable and contingent forms of counter-conduct with conducting power: “Just as there have been forms of resistance to power as the exercise of political sovereignty and just as there have been other equally intentional forms of resistance or refusal that were directed at power in the form of economic exploitation, have there not been forms of resistance to power as conducting?” (Foucault 2009, 195). Depoliticizing tendencies can be seen as the stratified manifestations and workings of the dominant liberal conduct in contemporary societies, whereas repoliticizations more often than not offer alternative (counter)conducts, which, when they gain prominence, step into the register of conduct and thus reveal their conducting character. How then are we to think the relationship between counter-conduct and conducting power, depoliticization and repoliticization?

Max Weber is most known for his work on rationalisation and the bureaucratic form of social organization, but in certain passages, notably in his essay “The Nature of Charismatic Domination” (1978), he, amongst other things, also attempts to understand the actions of individuals who go against the dominant current of affairs. Weber ascribed these forces “charismatic” qualities. Strangely enough, like Foucault, Weber (1978, 226–29) also analyzed charismatic power in relation to religious practices and movements. As opposed to bureaucratic forms of conduct, Weber (ibid., 227) notes that charismatic power:

Rather, charisma recognises only those stipulations and limitations which come from within itself. The bearer of charisma assumes the tasks appropriate to him and requires obedience and a following in virtue of his mission. His success depends on whether he finds them. If those to whom he feels himself sent do not recognise his mission, then his claims collapse. If they do recognise him, then he remains their master for as long as he is able to retain their recognition by giving ‘proofs.

What we notice when comparing Weber’s description of charisma to Foucault’s conception of counter-conduct is the presence and recognition of others that are required for the charismatic power to be(come) effective. This is very much in line with the Arendtian conception of power, which is actualized by the physical presence of bodies in the sphere of appearance and lasting only so long as the people persist together. Like counter-conduct, charismatic power, according to Weber, also has transgressive effects. Whereas the bureaucratic form of social organization is there only to replace “the belief in the holiness of what has always been”, it is charisma that is powerful enough to completely dismantle “the bonds of rules and tradition” and “overturn[s] all ideas of the sacred”. Weber sees this power of charisma as “divine” in its significance; it is “the characteristically ‘creative’ revolutionary force in history” that redirects social and political life from “the pious following of time-hallowed custom” (ibid., 232). Now, if we read Weber through Andreas Kalyvas’ reading of Weber’s concept of charisma, we can note a moment of inherent splitting in Weber’s understanding of politics. On the one hand we have the bureaucratization of society or its rationalization, which denotes the politics of the
ordinary (normal or formal politics), whereas with the introduction of charisma, we are exposed to the other aspect of politics that is able to produce “a fundamental change of heart” (Weber 1978, 232), which Kalyvas (2008, 41) calls the politics of the extraordinary. This opposition between different forms of politics or conduct, bureaucratic conduct and charismatic power, bring us back to the question I posed earlier, namely, what the relationship between conduct and counter-conduct, between depoliticization and repolitization, is. Repolitization requires the activation of the originary element of politics which is resistance to the depoliticized institutional politics. However, due to the ephemerality and instability of repoliticizing forces, the resistance movement needs to enter into the process of institutionalization. Weber recognized this need as well: at one point charisma has to undergo the process of a ‘routinization’, either by being traditionalized, rationalized or a combination of both (Weber 1970, 234). Without this crucial step, the effervescent repoliticizations risk dissipating in their power and effectiveness after reaching their mobilization climax - institutional, more permanent organization is therefore key.

**Repolitization and depoliticization: shared originary ontology?**

What if charisma and its routinization that might follow, or in other words, counter-conduct and conducting power, are part of the same structure, the same ontology that is actualized in different forms? Is not depoliticization then the inevitable consequence of a successful and over-time stratified repoliticization? Are repoliticization and depoliticization really contradictory processes? Instead of presenting the different forms of manifestations of repoliticizations and depoliticizations, I will now expose the common ontology that they both share. This part of the discussion will mostly focus on the originary and cyclical aspects of the ontology.\(^2\) I believe that the key element of this common ontology is power. Derrida’s essay on the mystical foundation of law can be of assistance here. The paper which was presented at the colloquium on “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice” in 1989 notably draws upon the work of another thinker, Walter Benjamin and his “Critique of Violence”. Derrida’s deconstructive analysis, through Benjamin, sheds light on the very relationship between depoliticization and repolitization through the notion of “violence of law”. Derrida maintains that law (or politics for that matter) has a double nature of violence. He brings up the conventional phrase in English, “to enforce law” (Derrida 1992, 5), which alludes to the force that accompanies the law. This force of law, or “mythic violence” (*ibid.*, 31), as Derrida also calls it, takes two forms: (1) the first form, *law-preserving* violence, is the one we generally know as positive law, including the enforcement mechanisms that go along with it, which conserves the set order of the things and ensures its continued reaffirmation and maintenance; (2) the other form, *law-making* violence, captures the moment or period during which law originates, founds and inaugurates itself in “performative and therefore interpretative violence” (*ibid.*, 13). What is remarkable in this observation is the transition which is not actually a transition, or at least not a marked and discernible crossing from one stage to another, from law-preserving to law-making violence. Rather, it seems there is “a more intrinsic structure” (*ibid.*) at play. This antagonism between the two modalities of the same structure, seemingly opposed to each other, but still one and the same, can be understood by looking at the almost lyrical words by Derrida (*ibid.*, 14) in the following passage on the performative ontology of language and what he calls “the mystical”:

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\(^2\) I will illustrate the overlapping of the analytical uses of the two processes in the last part of the paper.
Here a silence is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act. Walled up, walled in because silence is not exterior to language. It is in this sense that I would be tempted to interpret, beyond simple commentary, what Montaigne and Pascal call the mystical foundation of authority. One can always turn what I am doing or saying here back onto – or against – the very thing that I am saying is happening thus at the origin of every institution.

The aporetic structure of law-making/law-preserving violence is therefore “mystical”, according to Derrida, and the same could be argued about (counter)conducts and (de)politicizations. There is something about it that evades our interpretative, rationalizing capabilities, in its very performative power. Its force is at times “uninterpretable or indecipherable”, but it is “certainly legible, indeed intelligible since it is not alien to law” (ibid., 36). I’m going to allow myself to read here another quote from Derrida that attempts to grasp the aporia of power:

But it is, in droit, what suspends droit. It interrupts the established droit to found another. This moment of suspense, this épokhé, this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of non-law. But it is also the whole history of law. This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence. It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone. The supposed subject of this pure performative would no longer be before the law, or rather he would be before a law not yet determined, before the law as before a law not yet existing, a law yet to come, encore devant et devant venir.

It is in this sense that we can understand the structuredness of (de)politicizations which tells us that there is no need for ontologically separating the two as they both share the same dynamic performative force, once to conserve, once to interrupt and found anew. In The History of Sexuality, as pinpointed by the editor of the lecture notes at the Collège de France, Foucault utters, “[w]here there is power, there is resistance”, and continues: “and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault 1978, 95). Resistances are not only “passive” or reactionary, neither they are simply “a promise that is of necessity betrayed”; rather, they “are the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite” (ibid., 96). To further accentuate the ontological relatedness of politics (depoliticization) and resistance (repoliticization), one should read Foucault’s words from his manuscript pages, cited in one of the footnotes in the chapter on counter-conduct: “The analysis of governmentality /.../ implies that “everything is political.” /.../ Politics is nothing more and nothing less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first revolt, the first confrontation” (Foucault 2009, 217).

The unpredictability and the possible non-rationality of repoliticization

Up until now, we have looked at different ways of conceptualizing the aporetic relationship between conducting power and revolts of conduct, highlighting “the active sense of the word ‘conduct’” (ibid., 201) in counter-conducting individuals or groups, acting “in the very general field of politics or in the very general field of power relations” (ibid., 202). In the next part of my paper, I would like to pay some attention to the more negative and less “constructive” (constructive should always be understood towards something) side of (re)politicizations. At
the beginning of his 1 March lecture, Foucault stated (ibid., 195–6):

There is also the theme of the nullification of the world of the law, to destroy which one
must first destroy the law, that is to say, break every law. One must respond to every
law established by the world, or by the powers of the world, by violating it,
systematically breaking the law and, in effect, overthrowing the reign of the one who
created the world. /.../ The Western and Eastern Christian pastorate developed against
everything that, retrospectively, might be called disorder. So we can say that there was
an immediate and foundering correlation between conduct and counter-conduct.

What seems compelling in the above quotation is the profoundly negative and destructive
form that counter-conduct can take. Counter-conduct, or a repoliticization, needs not to be
conducive in a “rational” manner towards some positive alternative and order of things, to
some “better” way of conduct. Yet it might also show how something destructive can turn out
to be positive and more structured, outlying a new conducting framework. Foucault’s words,
“sinning to infinity” and “nullifying the world of the law”, bring me back to Derrida when he
talks about the “the annihilating violence of destructive law” or the “divine” violence (Derrida
1992, 31), as opposed to the human law-making violence. It seems that the divine violence is
actualized as if it struck out of the blue – it is “revolutionary, historical, anti-state, anti-juridical”
(ibid., 55). Moreover, this divine violence “does not lend itself to any human determination, to
any knowledge or decidable ‘certainty’ on our part. It is never known in itself, ‘as such,’ but
only in its ‘effects’ and its effects are ‘incomparable,’ they do not lend themselves to any
conceptual generalization” (ibid., 56). Both the mythic, human law-making violence and divine
violence contain an element of “the undecidable”, “the violent condition of knowledge or
action”, but which are “always dissociated” (ibid., 56). And this is exactly what puzzled me in
the Foucault’s quotation above: this undecidability, contingency and radical openness of
performative action, either with decidable knowledge and certainty or without it. In his
discussion of counter-conduct, Foucault, for the most part, put significant emphasis on
conceptualizing it “in the form of strategies and tactics” (Foucault 2009, 216), which implies
calculation and rationalization, belonging to the realm of law and politics, but there is also a
different side to resistant practices. These practices can be repoliticizing, which does not
mean, however, that they are necessarily constructive towards something.

The cyclical law of power: between ephemerality and institutionalization

The divine violence that Derrida and Benjamin talk about is what Arendt would probably
understand as “force”. Arendt pinpoints we often use “force” in everyday speech “as a
synonym for violence, especially if violence serves as a means of coercion” (Arendt 1969,
143). However, she thinks the term should be reserved for the “forces of nature” or the “force
of circumstances” to denote “the energy released by physical or social movements” (ibid.,
143–4). This force of repoliticizing movements can be better understood by what Arendt
describes as the unpredictability and uncertainty of the course that action takes. Arendt
speaks here of the double incapacity: one is the incapacity “to undo what has been done”
which is “matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of
any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives” (Arendt 1958, 233) – maybe this
is what Derrida meant with “the undecidable” being the violent condition of knowledge and
action, but which are always dissociated. This sequence of actions is a process which is
“never exhausted in a single deed, but on the contrary can grow while its consequences
multiply” (ibid.). From this we can see that “action has no end” (ibid.), hence our inability to predict with certainty the outcome of our actions. In light of this insight, we can demystify the “mystical” or “divine” character of destructive violence of law, the law of revolutions and so on. Our inability to rationalize the unforeseen, and thus the unrationlizable, accounts for the seemingly “out-of-the-blue” and unexpected qualities of divine violence that Walter Benjamin theorizes. For this reason, Arendt proclaims that “men” are unable to bear the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability, from which the action process draws its very strength”, and they have always known that (ibid., 233):

They have known that he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act.

To remedy the irreversibility and unpredictability of the action process is not to turn to “another and possibly higher faculty”, Arendt contends; the remedy is actually “one of the potentialities of action itself” (ibid., 236–7):

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility /.../ is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose “sins” hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.

This brings us back to the “conducting” dimension in the modality of counter-conduct. At one point or another, the circumstances of a situation require, or even demand, the “binding oneself through promises”, the routinization and institutionalization of repoliticizing power and its spirit, ever more slightly falling, yet again, into the destined trap of decay (Benjamin 1996, 251). It is in this sense that Benjamin diagnoses the “decay of parliaments” (Derrida 1992, 48). In the passage from revolutionary and charismatic presence (resistance) to transcendental representation (politics), these institutions forget the originary violence from which they were born: “When the consciousness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the institution falls into decay” (Benjamin 1996, 244). In this sense, we can also understand the decay of the pastorate that Foucault talks about, brought about by its “extremely rigorous and dense institutionalization” and “extreme complication of pastoral techniques and procedures” (Foucault 2009, 202–3). Moreover, the “amnesic denegation” (Derrida 1992, 47) of the decaying institutions is not due to “a psychological weakness”, says Derrida, but it pertains to their “statut” and “structure”. In other words, in the cycle of law-preserving violence and counter-violence, of conducts and counter-conducts repoliticizing

3 The diagnosis of “decay of parliaments” and “extreme complication” of the pastorate can also be understood through the literature on the critique of liberal democracy, “postpolitics” and the “political” (Žižek 1999; Rancière 1999, 2010; Mouffe 2005).
forces go through the institutionalization/routinization process until they reach the point of amnesia and decline into decay in face of a new counter force on the horizon.

This observation of the cycle between repoliticizing forces and their inevitable depoliticization when in power (in the general sense of the term, within representative institutions) is not new. In the early twentieth century, early elite theorists surfaced a similar conception in their critique of liberal democracy, but in terms of what they saw as the circulation of elites. Gaetano Mosca (1939, 68) thus spoke of a movement between periods of “social stability and crystallization” and those of “renovation and revolution”, a perpetual conflict between ossifying depoliticized structures of power and repoliticizing forces. Vilfredo Pareto, who claims to have coined the notion of the “circulation of elites”, talked about the rise of new elites from the lower strata of society to a position of power who flourished there and then fell into decadence (Pareto 1966, 132–4). Because of perceived inevitability of institutionalization if repoliticizing forces wanted to stay effective, Robert Michels (1962, 342) termed this dilemma “the iron law of oligarchy”:

The principle of organization is an absolutely essential condition for the political struggle of the masses. Yet this politically necessary principle of organization, while it overcomes that disorganization of forces which would be favorable to the adversary, brings other dangers in its train. We escape Scylla only to dash ourselves on Charybdis. Organization is, in fact, the source from which the conservative currents flow over the plain of democracy, occasioning there disastrous floods and rendering the plain unrecognizable. (ibid., 61)

Although the process of institutionalizing power is an inevitable step for repoliticizing forces to overcome their disorganization, this also entails a dilemma for the counter-movement to avoid falling into the same trap of overstratified depoliticization. Whether this cycle can ever be broken still remains to be seen. The post-2012 surge of new left parties in Greece, Spain and Slovenia, which have evolved from and are still institutionally affiliated to the corresponding protest movements, represents one such test for the “iron law of oligarchy”.

Concluding remarks

I started my paper with diagnosing liberalism as involving a significant tendency towards depoliticization of society and individuals. Here I perhaps need to be a bit clearer that my analysis only focuses on the later, more contemporary stages of liberal governmentality, what Foucault understood as “ordoliberalism” and Hannah Arendt as the advent of “the modern age”. So we are effectively talking about neoliberalism, a stage in the development of liberalism which conceals significant paradoxes and contradictions in its ideological composition. On the one hand the governing principle of political economy is still self-limitation or frugality, but on the other the state is expected be proactive in enabling and accommodating the market through all the means at its disposal: the rule of law, diplomacy and if need be, the use of repressive force, internally or externally. The debates around the (ir)relevancy of the state in today’s globalized and interconnected world before the crisis are tantamount to this paradox of neoliberalism. I then proceed to analyzing the phenomenon of repoliticization(s) through the concept of power and interrelated notions of politics and resistance. My basic argument is that we cannot understand the processes of repoliticization
and depoliticization in their full complexity without addressing the question of what power is and how, through power, the two different processes are connected. I explore this question by turning to other similar conceptions which in my opinion can offer more theoretical insight into the relationship between repoliticization and depoliticizations. Through the discussion of Foucault’s concept of (counter)conduct, Weber’s charisma, Derrida’s and Benjamin’s exposition of the violence of law, and ultimately the “circulation of elites”, as theorized by early elite sociologists, I basically lay out the dynamism of a progression of power from its ephemeral resistant form (repoliticizations) to its institutionalization (depoliticization). The theoretical discussion reveals three different elements and characteristics of repoliticization/depoliticization: (1) both processes share a governmental component, a desire to conduct, implicitly or explicitly; (2) they represent two different modes of power, one more ephemeral and charismatic, the other more structured and organized; (3) when we look over a longer period of time, a historical pattern emerges which can be described as a perpetual cycle or even law of politics.

There is one major weakness in my analytical approach to analyzing the dynamism between repoliticizations and depoliticization. As I have stated already above, I intentionally characterise the two processes in terms of more common concepts of resistance and politics. However, it has to be noted that the manifestation of repoliticizations is not necessarily ephemeral, its impact (politically speaking) not always radical and its form not always non-institutionalized or happening from outside established political structures of representation (the example of post-2012 new left parties in Greece, Spain and Slovenia can be pertinent here). The same can be said about depoliticization: depoliticization is not necessarily conservative in its political impact; it is not limited to the structures of the state, it can also manifest discursively in political movements (explicitly, and at first instance, apolitical populist discourse); and even more paradoxically perhaps, a depoliticization is based on a particular decision or a set of values which have social consequences, thus, it can be said it is always in a way also politicizing. We can attribute this difficulty to analytically grasp the two processes in a consistent manner to the ever on-going negotiation of the field of the political. Moreover, some events or decisions which may at first appear depoliticized, can in retrospect and through contestation undergo a reexamination of their political character/content.
References


