The Contribution of Laclau’s Discourse Theory to International Relations and International Political Economy: Introduction to the Symposium

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This symposium explores the value of Poststructuralist (or Political) Discourse Theory (PDT) for the analysis of world politics. PDT was originally developed by the late Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau and has entered the margins of International Relations (IR) in recent years, mainly by bringing in poststructuralist concepts that had previously been ignored by the more critical strands of theorizing. Against this background, the introduction (1) discusses the disconnect between PDT and research on world politics, primarily in IR, as well as PDT’s potential contribution, (2) provides an overview of PDT’s central theoretical tenets, in particular with respect to its social ontology and its theoretical concept of change and (3) introduces the contributions to the symposium.

Keywords: discourse; poststructuralism; social theory; International Relations; IPE; world politics; change; hegemony; practice; identity

Introduction

This symposium examines the contribution of (post-Marxist) poststructuralist (or political) discourse theory (PDT) to the study of world politics, and in particular to International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE). PDT is first and foremost associated with the works of the late Argentinian philosopher and political theorist Ernesto Laclau, whose seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, co-authored with Chantal Mouffe, laid the foundations for what would become a vibrant transdisciplinary field of
Although the foundations of PDT were laid by Laclau and Mouffe together, both theorists subsequently developed their arguments in different directions. While Laclau continued his work on further developing the analytical framework of PDT, incorporating insights from continental philosophy, rhetoric and psychoanalysis, Mouffe has pushed further the normative questions posed by PDT, asking how a radical democratic polity can become possible. The contributions to this symposium draw primarily on Laclau’s analytical contributions.

The motivation behind this symposium is our somewhat curious observation that although poststructuralist approaches have become a staple within critical IR and IPE, Laclau’s reception has been rather limited. So far,

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only a handful of book-length studies and a slightly larger number of articles and chapters have been published in the past couple of years. To be sure, this is not to say that Laclau has been a complete stranger to IR/IPE scholars either. In fact, leading proponents of IR poststructuralism have drawn on Laclau and Poststructuralism, and Postcolonialism,” in Handbook of International Relations, eds. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth A. Simmons (London: Sage, 2013), 145-70.

Mouffe to elucidate the ontological status of discourse. Also, scholars have used individual theoretical concepts from discourse theory in their work, such as the conception of discourse, nodal points, the empty signifier, the notion of decision, the relationship between particularism and universalism or the


logics of difference and equivalence.\textsuperscript{11} However, the overwhelming majority of studies follows some form of conceptual cherry picking rather than tapping into the full potential of discourse theory.

The relative neglect of Laclau and Mouffe cannot be explained (at least not anymore) by a general aversion to poststructuralism in the field. Indeed, over the past two decades IR has developed into a quite hospitable environment for so-called poststructuralist thought more generally. In fact, studies that draw on thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Deleuze, Agamben, Levinas and others have proliferated in IR. The relative absence of Laclau is even more puzzling for three reasons in particular. First, both Laclau and Mouffe have gained significant prominence not just in political theory but in the social sciences and humanities more generally. Indeed, Laclau has become “a standard reference in the field of post-Marxism”,\textsuperscript{12} with some calling his work the “most developed”\textsuperscript{13} or “most intellectually powerful”\textsuperscript{14} example of

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\textsuperscript{11} Hansen, \textit{Security as Practice}.


\textsuperscript{14} Göran Therborn, \textit{From Marxism to Post-Marxism}? (New York: Verso, 2008), 141.
post-Marxist theory. Similarly, his work with Mouffe has been described as “amongst the most significant theoretical work in recent decades”.\textsuperscript{15}

Second, Laclau has developed a comprehensive ontological framework that conceptualizes the social \textit{in toto} as discursive (we will get back to that in detail below) and that seeks its equal in terms of coherence and theoretical rigor.\textsuperscript{16} If taken seriously, the proposal to analyse the social as discursive challenges a broad range of conventional conceptions, including the notion of an extra-discursive reality and, by extension, between discursive and social practices, the distinction between the ideational and the material as well as established notions such as sovereignty, identity, inclusion and exclusion, threat, Othering and antagonism. As such, PDT is highly relevant for a number of current (meta-) theoretical discussions and approaches in IR, including not just “poststructuralism”\textsuperscript{17} but also practice theory,\textsuperscript{18} Actor-Network Theory and

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\textsuperscript{15} Sonnichsen, Hansen, and Jensen, “Introduction,” 251.


\textsuperscript{17} We are aware that “poststructuralism” is far from being a theoretical monolith, drawing on at times mutually exclusive traditions in social theory. See Johannes Angermüller, \textit{Why There Is No Poststructuralism in France: The Making of an Intellectual Generation} (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Nabers, \textit{A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics}. We simply use it here as a shorthand for the sake of simplicity.

\textsuperscript{18} Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, eds., \textit{International Practice Theory: New Perspectives} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); “The Play of International Practice,”
the new materialism.\textsuperscript{19} In a field of research at least once preoccupied with questions of “grand theory”,\textsuperscript{20} one would expect such a broad theoretical design not to go (virtually) unnoticed.

Third, not only does Laclau offer a social ontology, but he develops a general theory of social (\textit{i.e.}, discursive) change. Based on the central concepts of discourse, hegemony, difference, equivalence, antagonism and articulation, the framework is intended not merely to describe social change but to explain

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how particular discursive positions (elements in Laclau’s terminology) manage to become meaningful (moments in Laclau’s terms) or even widely accepted as (factually) ‘true’ or (morally) ‘right’ (thus hegemonic). We will get back to the framework in detail below, but what should be noted in this context is that due to its broad scope (basically providing an explanation of social change in all its forms), PDT has at least in theory an exceptionally wide-ranging field of application in IR, IPE and other social science disciplines concerned with world politics, broadly understood. In principle, PDT should be of interest to scholars concerned with phenomena as diverse as:

• identity, culture and other discursive articulations\textsuperscript{22} as well as their transformation;\textsuperscript{23}
• foreign policy change\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{24} Jakob Gustavsson, “How Should We Study Foreign Policy Change?,” \emph{Cooperation and Conflict} 34, no. 1 (1999): 73-95; Charles F. Hermann, “Changing Course: When
• norm dynamics,\textsuperscript{25} including norm emergence,\textsuperscript{26} diffusion,\textsuperscript{27} contestation, negotiation, erosion, death, and robustness,\textsuperscript{28} the ambiguity of norms\textsuperscript{29} as well as the rise and fall of dominant narratives and widely accepted ideas;\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{26}Maren Wagner, \textit{Social Emergence in International Relations} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).


• nationalism, cosmopolitanism and related issues;\footnote{31}


• processes of securitization, threat construction, inflation, exaggeration\textsuperscript{32} and
dissolution/desecuritization (think: end of the Cold War);\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, \textit{Security: A New Framework for Analysis}
(London: Lynne Rienner, 1998); Ole Wæver, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” in \textit{On
Hayes, “Identity, Authority, and the British War in Iraq,” \textit{Foreign Policy Analysis} 12, no. 3
(2016): 334-53; Chaim Kaufmann, “Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of
Mueller, and Mark G. Stewart, “Terrorism and Bathtubs: Comparing and Assessing the
Risks,” \textit{Terrorism and Political Violence Online First} (2018), doi:
and the Marketplace of Values,” \textit{Security Studies} 16, no. 3 (2007): 452-88; Stengel, this
issue.

\textsuperscript{33} Philippe Bourbeau and Juha A. Vuori, “Security, Resilience and Desecuritization:
Lene Hansen, “Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen
School and Directions for How to Apply It,” \textit{Review of International Studies} 38, no. 3
Security: Success and Failure in the Securitization and Desecuritization of Foreign Military
international organization\(^3\) and international/global/regional order(s)\(^4\)


• globalization/denationalization,\textsuperscript{36} global governance\textsuperscript{37} and associated questions of democracy,\textsuperscript{38} authority, and legitimacy;\textsuperscript{39}


• (international) leadership\(^{40}\), hegemony\(^{41}\) and hierarchy;\(^{42}\)
• conflict and cooperation, including rivalries\(^{43}\) and friendship;\(^{44}\)


• the emergence, persistence, transformation and of economic philosophies, 
  orders or systems like capitalism\textsuperscript{45} and neoliberalism;\textsuperscript{46} 
• international effects on domestic politics;\textsuperscript{47} 
• populism and world politics.\textsuperscript{48}

Scholars concerned with these issues should welcome the challenge and 
discover whether PDT can in fact provide any added value. This symposium 
thus takes a first step in this direction, exploring what PDT can add to our 
understanding of conceptual debates in the study of world politics, broadly 
understood. The remainder of this introduction sets out to do two main things. 
The next section provides a brief overview of PDT’s ontological framework and

\textsuperscript{45} Wolfgang Streeck, \textit{How Will Capitalism End}? (New York: Verso, 2017); Peter A. Hall and 
  David W. Soskice, eds., \textit{Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of 

\textsuperscript{46} David Harvey, \textit{A Brief History of Neoliberalism} (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007); 
  Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy, eds., \textit{The Handbook of Neoliberalism} 

\textsuperscript{47} We are referring here to the “second image reversed”, see Peter Gourevitch, “The Second 
  Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” \textit{International 
  Organization} 32, no. 4 (1978): 881-912; Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter, eds., \textit{Shaped by 
  War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development} (Pinceton, NJ: 

\textsuperscript{48} Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald, and Dirk Nabers, eds. \textit{Populism and World Politics: 
  Exploring Inter- and Transnational Dimensions} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); 
  Thomassen, this issue.
its theoretical model of social change. Since, all of the contributions to this symposium draw on PDT, we have opted for discussing general theoretical issues in the introduction to avoid any unnecessary overlap and repetition between the individual contributions. The final section provides an overview of the individual articles in this symposium.

**Poststructuralist Discourse Theory: Core Assumptions**

This section provides a brief overview of the central tenets of PDT, focusing on its social ontology and its model of social change.

**Ontological Basics: Rethinking the Social as Discursive**

As the name indicates, discourse theory is a theory of discourse. However, discourse must not be reduced to its linguistic dimension. In a PDT perspective, discourse must be seen as material in a post-Gramscian sense, as it is “embodied in institutions and apparatuses, which welds together a historical bloc around a number of basic articulatory principles”.⁴⁹ Linguistic and non-linguistic properties of a discourse are not played out against each other, but jointly constitute a structure of differential articulations which are only graspable within this structure, not from a position external to it. At the same time, as opposed to structuralism in linguistics, which conceives of discourses

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as fixed systems of meaning, discourse theory emphasizes the “impossibility of closure” of any and all discursive structures. What this means is that neither the meaning of a discursive element nor of a discursive totality (a discursive formation as a whole) can ever be completely fixed; the structure remains marked by “an ineradicable distance from itself”. This unfixity of discourse is also what makes change possible in the first place. Otherwise, different signifiers, for instance ‘apple,’ could not assume different identities (meanings) in different contexts, for instance a fruit, a painting of a fruit, a specific computer type or a person. The way identities are fixed is through their articulation as part of a discourse, while articulation is not a purely linguistic term but encompasses the whole sphere of social relations.

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In order to elucidate this process in more precise terms, Laclau’s differentiation between the discursive (or discursivity) and discourse is crucial: While discursivity remains essentially open and resembles an infinite structure of social differences, discourse ties together those elements which are connectable to others in a specific situation and thereby transforms them into moments. The process of transforming elements into moments (in a specific discourse) is what Laclau calls *articulation*. What happens in the process of articulation is that a number of discursive elements (signifiers, subjects, objects, practices) are connected to each other, as a result of which the identity (meaning) of the individual elements and the discursive totality as a whole is fixed.\(^5\) The discursive element, be it a term like “evil” or a human being (say, a citizen of a particular country) is “reduced to a moment of that totality”.\(^6\) That is, any discursive moment assumes a particular meaning within that context and all other possible meanings are excluded. In this context, the outside (other potential meanings that were ruled out in the moment of fixation) is threatening because it makes the fixation of meaning unstable, and it is also constitutive because the specific understanding is only possible because the other meanings are excluded. Similarly, the discourse as a whole has a constitutive outside. As a consequence, any result of articulatory practices (either a whole discourse or

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\(^6\) Ibid., 106, italics removed.
individual identities) is always only temporary and incomplete, which makes all meaning and identity highly context-dependent and inherently unstable.

Now, if discourse is not limited to linguistic phenomena (speech and written text), but includes all meaningful practices, objects, subjects and so on, then a whole new ontology of the social can be formulated. As Laclau and Mouffe point out,

“any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice, is either an incorrect distinction or ought to find its place as a differentiation within the social production of meaning, which is structured under the form of discursive totalities”.

This claim is much more far-reaching than it might initially seem. For what it means is that everything meaningful is inherent to discourse. Meaningless elements are literally unintelligible and as such do not play a role for social life. Consequently, discourse theory is, despite its name, above all a social and political theory.

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58 Laclau and Mouffe, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, 107.
Theorizing Discursive Change

Starting from this broad discursive ontology of the social, Laclau and Mouffe set out to understand processes of “hegemonization” by which certain discourses manage to establish themselves as universally valid. At the heart of their model is the concept of hegemony. Put very simply, hegemony involves a specific demand (a particularity) functioning as a symbol not only of a broad range of social demands but also of the (unattainable) ideal of a perfect, that is, fully constituted, society (the universal), in which all demands are fulfilled. At the same time, if successful, it also means that one particular way of understanding the world (one particular discourse) establishes itself as the only valid understanding of the world, for instance, of one particular concept of world order becoming universally accepted or of a specific issue becoming understood (primarily) as a security issue, not as something else. Usually, hegemonization follows an ideal-typical process involving the structural

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62 Wojczewski, *India’s Foreign Policy Discourse and Its Conceptions of World Order*; Wilhelm, this issue.

63 Stengel, this issue.
dislocation of a dominant discursive order, the emergence of struggles and the establishment and institutionalization of a new order (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Hegemonization.

Now, how can we explain that some hegemonic projects – attempts to establish a certain discourse as dominant – are more effective than others? Laclau highlights in particular three elements of any ideal-typical hegemonic project: (1) the construction of a broad range of social demands as equivalent (as going hand in hand), (2) the articulation of an antagonistic frontier between the Self and a radically threatening Other (that blocks the Self’s identity), (3) the representation of the totality of equivalent demands by one particular demand (an empty or master signifier).

Source: authors’ illustration

64 Nabers, this issue.
First, since any hegemonic project has to garner support to become dominant, it has to attempt to construct a broad chain of equivalences between different demands. What this means, put simply, is that the project claims that a number of demands that were previously considered disparate or even contradictory actually go hand in hand and that, as a consequence, these different demands’ proponents should work together. Thus, the “logic of difference” stresses the equivalential (common) content of the different demands. As opposed to that, the “logic of difference” stresses their differential demand, i.e., that they are actually disparate or even contradictory. Thus, the logic of difference can disrupt or break up the formation of hegemonic projects. This is the way resistance to hegemonic projects (or the defense of an old dislocated regime) manifests itself. Note that the transformation of elements into (equivalential) moments is never complete; also moments always retain some particular content. If they did not, they would become identical and collapse into one single demand. Thus, “all identity is


constructed within this tension between the equivalential and the differential logics”. As a general rule, the broader a chain of equivalence, the more subjects’ demands are incorporated and the likelier that they will identify with the project and the subject positions provided by it. At the same time, however, the breadth of a chain can also be a destabilizing factor. For the broader a chain is, the more moments with individual particular meanings it will include that might in other contexts be contradictory, and the more open to rearticulation and contestation it also is.

Second, the process of transforming elements into moments is intertwined with the construction of social antagonism. For the relation of equivalence is the result of the construction of an antagonistic frontier. Antagonism is the construction of a particular type of Self/Other relationship in which the radical (antagonistic) Other is blamed for (1) the fact that certain demands (e.g. for social welfare, peace and/or security) remain unfulfilled and (2) for the incompleteness of the Self’s identity (which is actually due to the constitutive dislocation of the structure). Different demands become

69 Laclau, On Populist Reason, 70.


71 Thus, antagonism should not be mixed up with other types of Self/Other relationships, such as enmity or the construction of a physical security threat, see Stengel, this issue.
equivalent only in reference to the excluded Other that is said to stand in the way of their realization. Linked to this is the claim that if only the radical Other could be overcome, all demands would be realized. Implied in the exclusion of an Other is always the production of a specific articulation of the Self: for instance, ‘the West’ emerges as a specific identity only in opposition to ‘the East’, ‘the rest’ or various other Others. The result is a split of the discursive space into two opposing camps.

Third, hegemony involves the actual hegemonic operation “of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification”. What is meant by this is that one demand (one particular) out of the totality of equivalent demands assumes the representation of all of the demands as well as, symbolically, the fullness of society (the universal) that can never be


reached. Hegemonic discourses are organized around privileged signifiers, so-called “nodal points” or “points de capiton”,78 which function as a horizon for subjects to identify, and associate their demands, with. The way this happens is that one demand empties itself of its particular content and becomes a “master signifier”79 or an “empty signifier”, that is, a “signifier without a signified”.80 For instance, ‘freedom’ can refer to any number of more specific demands, like ‘free’ trade, democracy, the freedom from wage labor, or the legalization of marijuana. Thus, rather than having a specific content in itself, freedom functions as a blank canvas for subjects to imagine their own pictures on. This way, an empty signifier becomes “a surface for inscription” with which a broad number of people can associate their demands and desires.81 Through this operation, the discursive formation receives a name and is as such constituted as a unified object in the first place (instead of having an a priori essence). As


79 Wullweber, this issue.


Laclau put it, “the name is the ground of the thing”.82 Linked to this is the promise that if only the demand that takes up the representation of the chain of equivalences were to be realized, the antagonistic Other would be overcome, with the effect not only of the realization of all demands but also, symbolically, the attainment of a full identity.

In this context, the contributions to the symposium also bring up points of debate within PDT. The empty signifier is an example here. The majority of empirical studies have interpreted the empty signifier in linguistic terms, understanding it as a word or combination of words like the “social market economy”,83 “justice,” “freedom”,84 “comprehensive/networked security,”85 a “people’s Europe” or “political union”.86 In his contribution to this symposium, Wullweber challenges this interpretation, arguing that the hegemonic relation can also be practical or material.87 Drawing on Laclau’s argument that discourse also includes all meaningful social practices, objects and so on, Wullweber


83 Martin Nonhoff, Politischer Diskurs und Hegemonie. Das Projekt ‘Soziale Marktwirtschaft’ (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006).

84 Nabers, A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics.

85 Stengel, this issue.

86 Biegoñ, Hegemonies of Legitimation, ch. 5, 6.

87 Wullweber, this issue.
analyzes money as a master signifier but without falling back on a linguistic point of view.

At the same time, the empty signifier is not completely void of particular meaning but is, like all other moments of the chain, “split between its equivalental content and its differential content”. 88 This is precisely the reason why it is important which signifier comes to represent the overall chain, as the emerging totality is not a pre-existing entity that only becomes named in the moment of representation. Rather, the moment of representation is performative. For the remaining particularity, the “minimal remainder”, 89 not only ensures that signifiers can be recognized in different contexts but in the case of the empty signifier significantly influences the meaning of the new discursive order, because it comes to represent the overall formation. Which signifier assumes the role of empty signifier is not predetermined and has to be established during the course of any analysis.

Two additional, broad characteristics of any successful hegemonic project need to be mentioned. First, any such project needs to demonstrate “its


radical discontinuity with the dislocations of the dominant structural forms”\textsuperscript{90} put simply, that is has learned “from the failure of previous discourses”.\textsuperscript{91} That means also that the new project has to hold within it the (ultimately unavoidably empty) promise to (this time!) fully repair the dislocated structure (which however is ontologically impossible). This is the mythical element of any hegemonic project, as it functions as an incarnation of a fully constituted “perfect society” that cannot really ever be reached.\textsuperscript{92}

Second, it is also important that a new hegemonic project does not clash with the “ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society”.\textsuperscript{93} Discursive orders are usually not created

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\bibitem{92} Eva Herschinger, “‘Hell Is the Other’: Conceptualising Hegemony and Identity through Discourse Theory,” \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} 42, no. 1 (2012): 86; Nabers, \textit{A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics}, ch. 7. This glossing over the fact that society can never be fully constituted but is the always-temporary result of contingent political decisions is what Laclau refers to as ideology Laclau, “The Death and Resurrection of the Theory of Ideology”; “Ideology and Post-Marxism.”

\bibitem{93} Ernesto Laclau, “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics,” in \textit{Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the


from scratch but in a field partially structured by sedimented practices,\textsuperscript{94} that is, discursive practices that have become institutionalized to such an extent that their origin in political struggles have been forgotten. They are taken for granted as if they are, and have always been, without alternative.\textsuperscript{95} The contributions to this symposium will illustrate that any successful project has to be credible in light of sedimented practices. For instance, if, say, “security” and “peace” seem to carry a special weight in discursive struggles, this is so because as a result of past discursive struggles they have been articulated as, in the case of security, the core function of the modern state\textsuperscript{96} and, in the case of peace, a core normative commitment in and precondition of the functioning of, democratic societies.\textsuperscript{97}

The Contributions to the Symposium

The articles of the symposium are a selection of papers originally presented at an international workshop on “Laclau’s Contribution to IR: Rethinking Core

\textsuperscript{94} See Nabers, \textit{A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics}.

\textsuperscript{95} Laclau, “New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time,” 34.


Concepts” that took place in April 2016 at Kiel University, Germany. The symposium begins with Dirk Nabers’s article, which formulates a discourse theoretical concept of crisis. Nabers argues that despite the widespread use of the notion in IR and related fields, a convincing definition of crisis has yet to be found. In contrast in particular to rationalist approaches, Nabers stresses the importance of understanding crises not as exogenously given phenomena but as social constructs. Drawing on Laclau’s notion of dislocation, he argues that crisis is actually a constant feature of any social structures. Understanding crisis in such a way directs our attention to the “futility of social identities” as well as their political nature.98

Eva Herschinger’s article turns to the issue of war– a core concern to scholars in a number of fields, including not just IR but also sociology or philosophy.99 Drawing on, and adding to, recent research in Feminist Security Studies and Critical Military Studies that challenge the conventional

98 Nabers, this issue.
assumption that war and peace can be as neatly separated from each other as can conflict zones from peaceful societies, Herschinger zones in on how everyday life in Western societies is influenced by war. Focusing on the link between (the suppression of) empathy and the creation of ‘suspect communities’, Herschinger traces war’s effect on identity formation and a resulting constant expansion of the “field of hostility”.

Frank A. Stengel’s contribution presents a theoretical reformulation of processes of threat construction or, as is it often referred to in IR, securitization. Stengel distinguishes two different types of securitization, depending on the scope and breadth of discursive change they represent. He differentiates between securitization (1) within an existing security discourse and (2) as part of larger discursive change in which a whole security discourse is modified or replaced. Specifically, Stengel focuses on the conditions that influence the relative effectiveness of different attempts to securitize issues (securitizing moves), which he argues differ depending on the type of securitization.


101 Herschinger, this issue.
In the contribution most explicitly located in the field of IPE (as well as economic sociology), Joscha Wullweber proposes a theoretical conception of money. In contrast to the still prevalent practice of empirically analyzing the empty signifier as an actual linguistic signifier (e.g., a word like “freedom”), Wullweber sets out to redeem Laclau’s promise of a comprehensive (not just linguistic) notion of discourse by arguing that money (not the signifier, but the object) acts as a master signifier, functioning as “the general expression of the value relation of commodities”.\(^{102}\) Reconceptualizing money this way directs our attention to its inherently political nature.

The symposium concludes with two contributions primarily located in political theory, Lasse Thomassen’s article on representation and Fränze Wilhelm’s paper on the ontology of global order. In his contribution, Thomassen carves out Laclau’s understanding of representation, which he contrasts with conventional understandings as a “correspondence between principals’ […] interests […] and the agents acting on their behalf”.\(^{103}\) Although primarily a theoretical argument, Thomassen’s intervention is also of relevance to scholars concerned with substantive phenomena of world politics. Thus, Thomassen demonstrates the analytical added value of rethinking representation by linking it up with salient debates about populism and what

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\(^{102}\) Wullweber, this issue.

\(^{103}\) Thomassen, this issue.
many perceive as a severe crisis of democratic institutions – topics IR scholars have only very recently begun to turn their attention to, in particular in connection with Donald Trump’s assumption of the US presidency.104

Drawing on Martin Heidegger in addition to Laclau, Fränze Wilhelm develops an ontology of global order (whether economic or political). Wilhelm criticizes objectivist notions of order as a given ‘thing’ and argues in favor of conceiving of order as the contingent, context-dependent and temporary result of on-going processes of ordering. As Wilhelm puts it, “order only is as the effects of the ordering of the things-which-are”.105 Like populism, the question of global or world order has become a particularly salient topic in current IR debates in the wake of the Trump presidency.106 In this context, arguments


105 Wilhelm, this issue.

about the precise ontological nature of world order – precisely what kind of a thing (liberal) world order is, whether it is a monolith or actually multiple, etc. – significantly influences our empirical discussions, including whether world order is universally accepted or contested, if and how it conditions states’ behavior, and how resistant it is to ‘populist’ (and other) challenges.

Together, the contributions to this symposium demonstrate that a PDT perspective has a lot to offer to central conceptual debates in IR and IPE. Still, as noted at the outset, an infinitely broader range of phenomena than the ones tentatively explored here remains to be analyzed from a PDT perspective, and Laclau remains far from being established even among the canon of critical scholars in IR/IPE. This, we argue, is to the detriment of both IR and IPE. It is our hope that this symposium serves as a stepping stone for scholars interested in exploring what PDT can offer for the analysis of a broad range of international phenomena.

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