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It's not about Facts, It's about Meaning:

How Do Poststructuralists Advise Policymakers
in questions of International Politics and
Security?

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Abstract

Advising policymakers in the field of International Politics and Security is not so much about presenting facts but rather about meanings. This view opens up a space for poststructuralist thinkers within Scientific Policy Advice (SPA) since one of their specific strength lies in providing interpretations and imagination of (always-other) political alternatives. In this paper, I firstly discuss what the academic-policy divide means for SPA (as understood in the statute of the SWP). Secondly, I briefly elaborate on the question why poststructuralists are regarded incompatible to work in a think tank. Thirdly, I show how the term poststructuralist advisor is not a contradiction in terms by giving a very brief overview of what characterizes my understanding of Poststructuralism and pointing out two strengths of poststructuralists’ policy advisors.

Keywords: Poststructuralism, Scientific Policy Advice, International Politics

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When I decided to accept a job at a leading German think tank, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (in the following SWP¹) in Berlin, this led to a range of rather critical reactions by my former colleagues. Most of them work at research institutes (as I did before I joined the SWP) or IR departments at universities, thus they mostly regard themselves as “real academics” doing “real science” trying to get their articles published in high-ranking peer-reviewed academic journals, their research projects financed by third-party funds and their ideas presented at international Call for Paper-conferences. For most of them, it was hard to imagine how I fit into an institute that mainly relies on policy-relevant research but does not deal with discussions on theoretical thinking in IR. Their skepticism usually touched one of the following areas: Firstly, some colleagues emphasized that a focus on policy-relevant topics kills your academic career. They shared the widespread view that there is a clear gap between scholars and policymakers. Hence, “policy relevance is at best a secondary consideration and at worst a distraction or mark of second rate scholarship (Parks and Stern 2013, 2).” Following this understanding, “policy-relevant research is by its very nature ‘anti-theory’ ” (Jentleson and Ratner 2011, 8) and distant from what they believe is regarded as “true scholarship.” Secondly, others pointed out that the over-emphasis of “hard facts” and what is going on in the “real world” (on a daily basis) makes it very difficult for policy advisors to continuously be engaged in “real academic” work. Since policy advisors are further pressured to react to current events, there may be the risk that their work is hard to distinguish from investigative journalism. Interestingly, this is very similar to Leopold’s critical adjustment of IR theory, only that we need to replace IR theory with SPA in his argumentation. Lepgold pointed out that IR theory often reflects on contemporary events too closely. Thus, “theorists [or in our case policy advisers, N.G.] lose their comparative advantage; they become little more than commentators on current events, but often without the detailed substantive expertise of journalists or historians (Lepgold 1998, 46).” Others again argued that this kind of work is clearly incompatible with

1 SWP refers to the German abbreviation of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik that in some way already highlights the undefined place of policy advice which is located somewhere between Academia/Science and Politics.

poststructural thinking, which is rather famous for the softness of its approach in comparison to the “hard facts” that neopositivists deal with. Thirdly (and maybe for that reason), some colleagues made it very clear that the work in a think tank is clearly not regarded as “scientific”. Policy advisors mainly rely on applied area and/or country expertise, which is rather descriptive, and not reflecting the scientific standards within IR.

These reactions had to a certain degree to do with the fact that most of my colleagues put me in a critical, poststructural or, let’s say, non-mainstream corner of IR which makes it even harder for them to believe how someone, who is apparently not interested in “real-world problems” or “hard facts”, could actually advise policymakers.² However, to a much greater deal, these judgments/prejudices build on a series of misunderstandings about the place of Scientific Policy Advice (SPA) within the discipline. This particularly stems from the long-existing discussions about the gap between academic and policy worlds and the aspect that SPA is often marked as the “bridge” between science and politics. In addition, most of my colleagues regard poststructuralism as incompatible with SPA.

In this paper, I firstly discuss what the academic-policy divide means for SPA (as understood in the statute of the SWP). Secondly I briefly elaborate on the question why poststructuralists are regarded incompatible to work in a think tank. Thirdly, I show how the term poststructuralist advisor is not a contradiction in terms by giving a very brief overview of what characterizes my understanding of Poststructuralism

2 The IR research at my former institute was dominated by neopositivist as well as by scientific realist approaches. The former (very generally) implies works that reflect what happens in the world by (hypothesis-) testing observable procedures, processes, or activities to determine the facts about the world. The latter refers to works on theoretical models/concepts and how they are displayed in the “real world”. Both understandings rely on what Jackson (2011) called a mind-world dualism which at this point is of much bigger interest to me than the differences between the neopositivist and scientific realist research in IR. This dualism, which is as old as social science, implies a clear separation between the world and the researcher (the mind). The world is in and for itself, it is “out there” and displays the “reality”. The world is the fixed foundation for our knowledge and, consequently, preexist our mind. Hence, we are not already embedded in the world but, following this understanding, we are always in need to discover the world.

and pointing out two strengths of poststructuralists' policy advisors.

Talking Prejudices I: What does the academic-policy divide mean for SPA?

The complaints about the gap between policy and theory or in the words of Alexander George (1993) between the cultures of academia and government are still prevailing in the discipline of International Relations. The view that IR has become “too detached from the world of practices, too fond of theory (Wallace 1996, 304)” and too focused on methods (Herboth 2011) is one reason why policymakers sideline IR scholars. Interestingly, the discipline that once was famous for practitioners who wrote for other practitioners (Lepgold 1998) or in William Wallace's words “grew out of reflections on policy, and out of desire to influence policy, or to improve the practice of policy (1996, 302)” loses her ability to speak truth to power. This is mainly the case because “speaking truth to power” (to put it very bluntly) does not any longer concur with the self-imposed scientific standards of the discipline. In the eyes of many, IR has finally grown up into a “real discipline” that increasingly deals with itself. That includes for instance discussions about paradigmatic wars regarding the different -isms in IR, the question of how many great debates have yet occurred in the discipline (Wæver 2008) as well as debates about the right way to structure the discipline at all (Jackson and Nexon 2013) or the plea for a greater pluralism – regarding different philosophical ontologies – in IR (Jackson 2011). Following this view, the growing detachment of academia from politics is the price to be paid for the new specialization within IR and “this is more important than whether such scholarship is relevant (Nye 2009).”

Regardless of all the underlying assumptions that I just made (assuming a common understanding of science, scientificness, theory, practice, politics, IR etc.), it, however, becomes apparent that there emerges an increasingly empty space between truth (IR as discipline) and power (politics). However, neither academics nor policymakers can or want to fill this space. It somehow seems that both have agreed on what Walt (2005, 40) referred to as a division of labor which says that scholars focus on theory and policymakers on practice. In this context and as Walt highlights, many believe in the interesting assumption – following a “knowledge-driven model of impact” – that “scholarly

theorizing will eventually ‘trickle down’ from the ivory tower into the mind-sets, in-boxes, and policy responses of policy makers (2005, 40).” This – at least from a scholarly perspective – locates IR still at the “pinnacle of the status hierarchy” (Walt 2005, 40). Following this argumentation, scholars are rather free to do what they want since their ideas incidentally find a way into the minds of policymakers. However, recent studies show that the general influence of famous IR approaches or key figures of the discipline (such as Kenneth Waltz, Robert O. Keohane or Alex Wendt) on policymaking is in fact very low (Avery and Desch 2014).³ A small group of US scholars (such as Joseph S. Nye, Stephen M. Walt, Janice Gross Stein or Stephen D. Krasner) that were all briefly involved in politics also experienced and later reflected on this lack of impact (Krasner et al. 2009; Nye 2009; Walt 2012).

When I now argue that SPA is somehow located in-between science (truth) and politics (power), it does not mean that I simply accept the widely assumed division of labor. Nevertheless, I regard SPA as part of both contexts (science/politics) and, more importantly, SPA represents a context and meaning on its own. This particularly comprises the task to present scientific knowledge, theories or, in general, academic research (meanings) in a policy-relevant manner. In other words, policy advisors need to dissect the main arguments of the discipline, which on the one hand underscores the need for being deeply *engaged* in the academic discourse. In a second step, they need to present their findings in such a way that they make sense to policymakers, which on the other hand highlights SPA's necessary *detachment* from the academic language – but not the academic discourse as such. In this regard, the current director of the SWP Volker Perthes (2011, 286) also emphasizes [quotation at length]:

SWP's primary goals are to translate scientific knowledge to the needs of policymakers and to undertake original scientific research. The latter is often more *applied* than *basic*, even though contributions to the body of theory in international relations have been, and will be made. In order to be successful, the institute has to fulfil a double function; to respond to

³ Avery and Desch even show that there is “a substantial difference between policymakers and scholars in terms of which regions of the world they regard as critical and the latter actual study (2014, 235).” The biggest scholarly ignorance can be observed regarding the study of East Asia (Hundley, Kenzer and Peterson 2013).

the needs and interests of policymakers and to stay involved in the global high-level discourse on international relations with other academics, think tankers and practitioners.

Facing the overall acceptance of the academic-policy divide in the discipline as well as placing SPA in-between truth and power, leads to a range of challenges and problems that are not discussed sufficiently among IR scholars and policy advisors. Firstly, there exists the general challenge that think tanks (like the SWP) do not fill in the gap between policy and theory but rather increase and institutionalize it.⁴ In consequence of the latter, policy-oriented analysts become more and more disconnected from the discussions in IR. However, if policy advisors and think tankers lose their link to the discipline and only produce op-eds, brief policy analyses or give interviews, it is reasonable to ask what then still could comprise the added value of SPA (for academia as well as for politics). Harald Müller even argues that SPA's particular task is to question the often-perverse theoretical debate and examine whether it is useful for analyses of world affairs or not. If policy advisors do not do this, they in a way refuse to work (2006, 216). There is still another problem connected to this challenge. When policy advisors distance themselves *from the discipline*, they, nevertheless, make use of concepts, notions or ideas *of the discipline*. Thus, while they talk truth to power, they distribute their specific view of world affairs to policymakers without reflecting on the different understandings existing in the discipline. On the one hand, this means nothing else than an intellectual standstill since the world (and everything that happens in the world) then simply is what it is. On the other hand, it also means that policy advisors stop asking questions about how they produce knowledge or how the respective facts that form the basis of their analyses are generated.

In addition to this general challenge, two further problem areas complicate a fruitful exchange/debate between IR scholars and policy advisors. Firstly, I want to highlight a structural problem. Scholars who work in a think tank are usually not trained to act as policy advisors. There does not exist a professional degree program in Germany (and most likely not in other

4 I mostly speak of the (in many regards) very specific German context and my own experiences working at the SWP. However, although I heavily rely on US references in this paper, it still helps to identify issues that are also relevant for the German context.

countries) that explicitly teaches SPA. Furthermore, Graduate Schools usually have a specific interest in students who write methodologically and/or theoretically strong dissertations. While pursuing a PhD, students are seldom encouraged to write for policy audiences or serve for a short period in public service although many IR students spend a lot of time in distant places to conduct fieldwork and gain comprehensive knowledge about a concrete policy field, world region or country.⁵ This situation has much to do with the bad reputation of policy work for your career. If you want to engage in politics more directly, you usually have to wait until after tenure (Walt 2005, 42). In length Stephen Walt (2012a, 38) rightly points out

Younger scholars understand that theoretical novelty and methodological sophistication are valued much more than in-depth knowledge of a policy area; indeed, there is a clear bias against the latter within contemporary political science. Those without tenure are routinely cautioned not to waste their time writing for policy audiences for fear of being deemed 'unscholarly'. Because work that might be useful to policy makers brings few rewards, it is hardly surprising that university-based scholars rarely try to produce it.

Still most policy advisors and analysts at think tanks, particularly at the SWP, hold a PhD and usually have a rather sophisticated academic background. Hence, when scholars decide to join the SWP, they not necessarily have a background in policy advising and most of them are in fact thrown in at the deep end. Younger advisors (mostly in their Thirties) then very much rely on the willingness of senior colleagues to share their experience and on the effectiveness of the existing institutional frameworks (such as for instance a distinctive internal and external communication strategy or concrete information about un/successful dialogue formats with policymakers).

5 The SWP provides the opportunity for PhD students to either join the institution as research assistant for one of the SWP research divisions. Usually, students get a three year contract (50%) and then have the possibility to apply for a one-year scholarship (Forum Ebenhausen) to finish their dissertations. Others are externally funded and join the SWP as guest researchers to make use of the facilities and opportunities at SWP (insight in SWP work, etc.). The SWP even organizes doctoral meetings where PhD students present their work and discuss among each other as well as with other SWP researcher.

The second problem tackles something I would describe as a substantial communicational gap between IR scholars and policy advisors. Obviously, there are many opportunities (for example conferences, workshops, national/international experts' groupings, track-2 dialogues, etc.) for scholars, policy advisors and politicians to come together and discuss world affairs. In addition, scholars also have again and again analyzed the relationship between academia and politics, discussed the question what policymakers need from academics (George 1993; Stein 2009; Avery and Desch 2014) or described the broader content of SPA, particularly its advantages and difficulties in opposite to the political arena or even different types of SPA. What I now mean with the communicational gap does not actually refer to the general (rather scholarly) debates on the academic-policy divide or the gap between theory and practice in foreign policy but, more importantly, it points to the concrete relationship between IR research and SPA. Hence, more than twenty years after George's attempt to bridge the gap between the two cultures of academia and policymaking; it is long overdue to reframe one of the central questions of his book (1993, 18): *How do policy advisors use the knowledge that is developed by IR scholars for assisting policymaking?* In other words, how can we integrate the growing diversity and creativity within IR also in our thinking of SPA or, even more bluntly, how do feminist IR studies, works on visual representations or science fiction in IR help policy advisors to speak to policymakers? Consequently, the vital problem is the necessary degree of engagement and detachment of SPA from the discipline. Even leading (German) think tanks still define the position, role and goal of SPA rather vague and seldom have an impact on the composition of curriculums in IR departments. In short, think tanks, lobbying or policy advice represent phenomena that are interesting to analyze for IR scholars in the discipline but are not regarded as *part of* the discipline. SPA is not a subfield but a study field of IR.⁶

⁶ Another problem is that scientific policy advice is not legally protected in Germany. Everyone who wants to advise the government can do so and call him/herself policy adviser. Regarding the analysis of think tanks in and for IR, the recent analysis of International Crisis Group by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and others (2014) is a welcoming exception.

Talking Prejudices II: Why are poststructuralists incompatible to work in think tanks?

This lack of imagination has much to do with the seemingly incompatibility of the two areas of expertise, SPA and Poststructuralism. It further stems from a rather superficial (but predominant) understanding of what policy advisors do in a think tank as well as of what poststructural IR actually comprises. I remember two incidents that draw my attention to this lack of imagination. Firstly, three years ago I co-organized and participated in a workshop on the relationship between ontology and methodology – challenges for theory and praxis in IR and Comparative Area Studies. The concluding roundtable particularly dealt with the question of how the increasing plurality within the discipline (in terms of different approaches to knowledge or philosophies of science) can be transmitted into concrete empirical research in order to open up new perspective on global politics. In this context, the moderator asked whether poststructuralists could act as policy advisors and give recommendations to policymakers. Not all of the participants represented radical poststructuralists⁷ but, more importantly, all of them denied the supremacy of the Cartesian dichotomy – what Richard Bernstein so well pointed out as either/or dualism – as the only, “right”, way to do IR. They, however, agreed on the absence of an objective truth and ultimate foundation of (international) politics (see for instance Marchart 2007; White 2000; George 1994). Hence, the basis of their work is an agreement on contingency – not to be confused with relativism – in IR and on monism instead of dualism (Jackson 2011). Hence, from their perspective, knowledge production can never be neutral or independent of the world. The knower and the world are involved in the same game, not different ones, which is why knowledge is never, as such, given or foundational; it is rather referring to a constant process of constituting. As Jackson (2011, 36-7), points out, “the researcher is a part of the world in such a way that speaking of ‘the world’ as divorced from the activities of making sense of the world is literally nonsensical.”

⁷ Georg Glasze, Annika Mattisek, Delf Rothe and Chris Methmann represent the Laclauian front; Patrick T. Jackson, Benjamin Herboth are interested in the relationship between philosophy of science and IR; Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is firstly an area expert for the Middle East but also interested in discourse theory.

Interestingly, all participants expressed a high skepticism about the role that poststructuralists could play in a think tank. Their overall reactions could be clustered twofold. First, they emphasized that think tanks, or SPA respectively, would, after all, represent the institutional expression of the very (IR) neopositivism they usually distance themselves from in their work. This means a focus on real-world problems and, furthermore, implies a work that reflects what happens in the world by (hypothesis-) testing observable procedures, processes, or activities to determine the facts about the world. Thus, SPA, in more philosophical terms, relies on a mind/world dualism which produces a different (and in the end incompatible) language game contrary to Poststructuralism. The participants were convinced that SPA mainly builds on rational argumentations, knowledge of observables (objects that can be measured) and correlations. This, however, is not the case. Policymakers are not even interested in discussions about methods, modeling or statistics (in other words, Political Science as such) but rather regard disciplines such as Area Studies and History as most useful (Avery and Desch 2014, 229).⁸ As Avery and Desch cite one policymaker (2014, 231), “any analysis (for example, in area studies) that gets at the UNDERLYING causes, rather than current symptoms, of problems has deep policy value.” Consequently, *policymakers are not interested in facts* (they clearly have more access to facts anyway) *but meanings and interpretations*. This mirrors Henry Kissinger’s famous opinion that “the best academic preparation for government service was training in philosophy, political theory, and history (quoted by Walt 2012b).”⁹ In many ways, this is also the case for a career in SPA. Against this background, it becomes clear that the participants’ skepticism rather build on a predetermined (and wrong) image of SPA.

Second, the participants argued that it is not the task of poststructuralists to care about politics or,

more precisely, about the question of what policymakers require making decisions. They are not interested in policy-relevant research and they particularly do not give much about translating their views into a plain and comprehensible language for policymakers. After all, poststructuralists usually question most of the ideas, structures, and actors that SPA still deals with. It seems unthinkable for them to work within the very discourse that they dissect in their research. In a nutshell, their argument is as follows: because poststructural thinkers challenge the basic categories of the discipline (nation-state, rational actors, anarchy, power, etc.), it is principally impossible for them to accept the language and prerequisites made in SPA. This negative argument can, however, also be turned into one for a stronger engagement of poststructuralists in SPA. The main obstacle is the assumption that SPA and policymaking mainly rely on the (neopositivist) mainstream that clearly dominates the discipline. It is a rather scholarly mistake to blindly transfer the general situation in IR – where poststructural/critical thinking is still located at the (even though growing) periphery – on SPA which for many reasons needs to be more open(-minded) than the discipline. I have already pointed out that SPA is not about facts but interpretations. This also implies the demand for contextualization of the continuously changing political realities highlighting the uncertainties (or contingencies) that underlie politics. In addition to interpretation, SPA also needs to irritate and question the established assumptions of political decisions (Perthes 2012, 35) and who would be more predestined to irritate than poststructuralists? After all, their works challenge the status quo and further try to generate voices that are usually not heard (or listened to). Like feminist IR scholars, they can also simply shout, “You just don’t understand” (Tickner 1997) and many of them already do this. This also includes scholars involved in seemingly more traditional topics of IR such as security and foreign policy discourses (Hansen 2006; Snetkov 2015) or geopolitics (Dalby 2008, 2010; Postel-Vinay 2007, Godehardt 2014a). Others focus on topics such as aesthetics and IR (Bleiker 2009; Shim 2014). Hence, Ashley’s diagnosis (1996, 243) that “post-structuralist writings have rigorously explored the dangers, the difficulties, the enclosures of possibility that result when it is maintained that this model, and this alone, can fully capture and express the creative potentials of human activity” is still accurate. In this sense, the specific otherness of poststructuralism

8 Although Avery and Desch (2014) questioned mainly US policymakers, I would suspect that this situation is very similar in the German context (in general many other national contexts) as well.

9 Walt’s summary of Kissinger’s remarks continues as follows (2012b): “In particular, he argued that training in political theory taught you how to think in a disciplined and rigorous manner, and knowledge of history was essential for grasping the broader political context in which decisions must be made. It was clear that he also sees a grounding in history as essential for understanding how different people see the world, also for knowing something about the limits of the possible.”

could (and maybe should) be regarded as chance for SPA after all.

The second incident refers to a job interview with the Department of Asian and International Studies at the City University of Hong Kong. At some point in the interview, the director asked me, “as a poststructuralist, how would you respond in 30 seconds to a power transition theorist (in form of an annoying journalist) who in due line of the US new pivot of Asia policy is claiming that there will be a coming conflict with China?” This example is not primarily about the indeed very interesting question at hand, but rather about the indicated time restriction *in 30 seconds*. The interrogator presumes a certain difficulty for poststructuralists to give short answers and to put their view in a nutshell. Basic philosophical writings of poststructuralism do not have the reputation to be an “easy read” (probably like most other texts in political theory) which makes it even harder to image an eloquent and sharp comment by poststructuralists that also engages with current questions of international politics and security. This, however, is not only a problem for poststructuralists but in fact a general one within academia. As Nye (2009, 117) rightly points out, “For the academic, time is a secondary consideration, while accuracy and elegance are primary. For practitioners, timing is everything.” In the context of SPA, it is hence necessary for poststructuralists to develop the ability of pointed statements, which would clearly not be a disadvantage for the overall standing of poststructuralism in IR.

Poststructural policy advisors: no contradiction in terms?

It is somewhat obvious that I cannot discuss the content of poststructural thinking in IR comprehensively at this point. What I, however, want to do – since many of the questions raised by my former colleagues also underline the still existing misunderstandings about basic assumptions of poststructuralism – is to introduce (in a criminally brief way) key aspects that I found relevant for my inquiry about poststructuralists as policy advisors.

Firstly, I very much like to highlight Jim George’s idea that poststructural thinking opens up a “‘thinking space’ beyond the traditions of foundationalism and simplistic appeals to objectivist truth about the world and its people (1994, 25).” This “thinking space” is rather fragile and consists of many diverse perspec-

tives of poststructuralism. It follows that many poststructural IR scholars find it difficult to subordinate their works under an *-ism*, that is *one* particular understanding of poststructuralism.¹⁰ After all, poststructuralists usually aim to challenge the “doorkeeper of IR” (Bleiker 1997) who long enough claimed that they (feminists, poststructuralists, postmodernists and other critical non-mainstream IR scholars) are “speaking the language of exile” (Ashley and Walker 1990). Poststructuralists in fact try to open up our “limits [set by the doorkeepers, N.G.] of what can be thought, talked, and written of in a normal and rational way (Bleiker 1997, 63).” Consequently, the poststructural intervention marks an end to the necessity for grand narratives in IR. Its representatives rather like to “tell a meaningful story which at the same time leaves us with irritation (transl. NG, Stäheli 2000, 7).”

Secondly, poststructuralists regard themselves as always already embedded in the world; their studies, thus, are not based on a given dichotomized world view (real/scientific, mind/world, object/subject, etc.). They rather deal with “the historical, cultural, and linguistic practices in which subjects and objects (and theory and practice, facts and values) are constructed (George 1994, 192).” More precisely, it is of interest how the world is understood in specific historical moments (highlighting the ever changing status of knowledge) and what kind of thinking constitutes specific social practices – things that we (or policy-makers) do. Furthermore, poststructuralists do not regard themselves as distanced (or objective) observers of world affairs but in fact as inevitably participants of (world) politics.

Thirdly, poststructuralists do not reject the existence of “the here and now”, “hard facts” or “real problems”, in other words, they do not deny the material existence of objects or subjects. However, they definitely deny the assumption that subjects/objects have meanings outside of discursive contexts (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). “Truth is produced through discourse

¹⁰ The fact that “poststructuralism” gets increasingly included in newly published IR textbooks, only shows that these approaches finally have arrived in the discipline and has gained a similar status next to the other big -isms in the discipline. In addition, many poststructural IR scholars published their own textbooks trying to rewrite the content of international relations in a poststructural way or introduce aspects of poststructural thinking into IR (for example: Dunne, Kurki and Smith 2007; Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 2009; Zehfuss 2009). However, it is usually still difficult to find scholars that would identify themselves as “poststructuralist” – usually that is something others do.

(Edkins 1999, 15)” and discourse seen as “a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed (Laclau 1988).”¹¹ Hence, a chair clearly is a chair – even for a poststructuralist. When we enter a classroom, we usually know what to do. The chair is part of a teaching context where students usually sit down on chairs. However, the moment someone throws a chair at another person, the chair also is a weapon. Then the chair becomes part of a different discourse, for instance a conflict between two students or a hyperactive child losing control. Following this argumentation, politics such as the US rebalancing towards Asia, China’s neighboring policy, questions of terrorism, etc. also only reach meaning(s) through (the respective) discourse.

It follows, fourthly, that poststructural thinking particularly questions the often-assumed certainty of politics. Poststructuralists analyze how discourses are constituted. At the same time, they emphasize that there is no final closure of discourse, which is why meanings can only be partially fixed, and have to be continuously articulated. Thus, poststructuralists agree on the absence of an ultimate foundation and this underscores the assertion that political actions, decisions or entities refer to underlying *contingencies* that always incorporate the possibility of alternative foundations (Marchart 2007). Politics is never neutral or an end in itself. Politics is, however, understood as “a practice of creation, reproduction and transformation of social relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 153).” Poststructural thinking, hence, portrays the contingency, historicity and precariousness of politics (Glynos and Howard 2007, 11).¹² As David Campbell rightly underscores,

11 Further, “discourse make intelligible some ways of being in, and acting towards, the world, and of operationalizing a particular ‘regime of truth’ while excluding other possible modes of identity and action” (Milliken 1999, 229). Hence, discourse is seen as not separate from, but rather as constitutive of practice, as every social phenomena and object obtains their meaning(s) through discourse (Müller 2008; George 1994).

12 There is a complex debate about the difference between politics and the political within poststructural thinking. It is not my intention here to give a comprehensive and coherent overview about this aspect. Following Jenny Edkins (1999), I, however, want to highlight that politics (in the narrow sense) refers to everything regarding the political process. The political (in the broader sense) deals with the “frame of reference within which actions, events, and other phenomena acquire political status in the first place” (Dallmayer quoted by Edkins 1999, 2). Hence, politics is somewhat embedded in the political but politics and the political are impossible to corre-

Politics is not just about who gets what, when and how. It is also about how we come to be who we are, and how we select issues, constitute them as problems and render them in particular ways. Conceptual choices frame our practical options.¹³

Poststructuralists, therefore, focus on the interpretation of discourses, how the meanings of these discourses are constantly negotiated and constructed as well as how a discourse – or structure of meanings – becomes a hegemonic one (Laclau 1988; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). In addition, poststructural thinking points to alternatives and emphasizes a process of differentiation (or differencing), so that something (a person, a policy, a statement etc.) is only what it is due to its differential relationship to something else. This differential process is not constructed on essentialist grounds; it has to be constantly articulated which is why assigning political meaning to something is also a constant task – not only for policy advisors (and academics) but also policymaker. Poststructuralists, thus, take away our certainty that things can only be understood in this or that way. They do not deny the existence of decisions, frames, policies, terrorist attacks, etc. but they do question the essentiality and totality of these things and they get particularly skeptical when politics seems to reach a point of no return. Turning to SPA and particularly the question of how the notion of a poststructuralist policy advisor is not a contradiction in terms, I now point out two strengths of poststructural thinking. The first one deals with the focus on “meanings” over “facts”. This includes a specific strength in interpretation/contextualization as well as the imagination of political alternatives. The second one refers to the aspect that poststructuralists often do irritate and, furthermore, gives space to voices that are seldom listened to. At this point, I would like to give an example that partly touches both strengths.

In June 2014, I finished a SWP research paper¹⁴ about China’s new Silk Road initiative. It particularly

spond; they only communicate through the process of differencing (Marchart 2007; Heidegger 2008).

13 See David Campbell’s website as reference: <http://www.david-campbell.org/politics/> (last accessed, 13.09.2013).

14 The SWP research papers (in German: SWP Studien) are the flagship publications of the institute. They represent comparably long (usually more than 30 pages) research papers. From the SWP perspective, these papers are a cornerstone of the institute’s interpretation of scientific policy advice. Most of these research papers are firstly written in Ger-

is about the new Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) for the greater Eurasian region that Xi Jinping announced during his 10-day trip through Central Asia in early September 2013 (Godehardt 2014b). This initiative was described very vague at first (which is not an unusual approach for the Chinese leadership, especially when they aim to introduce new policies); it was carefully announced as a regional vision (not national strategy) and long-term plan of the Chinese government that in the end will bring benefit to every country that decides to participate in it. The main idea of the SREB builds on China's – mostly on Xinjiang's – economic engagement with the Central Asian countries. The vision of the Chinese leadership is to expand this relationship to the greater Eurasian region – and eventually Europe.¹⁵ Hence, at the time of writing, not many "facts" were available and my report mainly builds on interviews with Chinese colleagues, official speeches, media reports and a few academic articles. However, the Chinese national leadership, provincial cadres, the Chinese media and Chinese scholars distributed many different understandings (which are, in my view, also "facts") of the SREB. Therefore, what I did in the research paper is that I tried to unfold the spectrum of interpretations by showing simply who said what when and, in more theoretical terms, by highlighting how the different perspectives ("facts") were produced. Consequently, theoretical and methodological discussions such as how I understand the notion of "discourse", how exactly I conducted my interpretative analysis or how I decided to choose between arguments and let out others, are not part of the final report. Its focus is on the results (my interpretation

man since the audience of the SWP aside from the chancellery and various Ministries are parliamentarians in the Bundestag who are usually not elected because of their foreign language abilities. However, due to the growing European competition and the wish to increase the international visibility of the SWP, more and more SWP publications are translated into English.

¹⁵ During his stay in Indonesia in October 2013 Xi Jinping also announced a Maritime Silk Road which complements the idea of the Silk Road Economic Belt (Yi lu, yi dai – One road, one belt) and is aimed to connect China to the Asia-Pacific geographic spaces as well as Eurasian landmass. The importance of the Silk Road imagery for the Chinese leadership also became apparent before and during the APEC summit in Beijing in November 2014. In a meeting with representatives of Pakistan, Bangladesh and five other Asian countries one week ahead of the official APEC summit Xi Jinping promised another \$40 billion infrastructure fund (so-called Silk Road Fund) to improve the connectivity (transportation, trade links) among Asian nations.

and conclusions) that I present in a policy-relevant manner. Nevertheless, it is still crucial that I am also aware on what basis I actually produced these results and facts, especially for the sake of *scientific* policy advice. The challenge is to find the right balance between *engagement* in poststructural IR and *detachment* from poststructural language (without just giving banal interpretations).

Another challenge is the question of policy-relevance; regarding my example, it could be easily asked, why the German government or the EU should be concerned about the announcement of China's new SREB initiative? This requires a distinctive creativity, especially in this case because China's Silk Road initiatives – at the time of writing – had not been a (or any) priority in German or European politics.¹⁶ The policy advisor, thus, has to persuasively translate his/her knowledge for the respective recipients (in my case German politicians) in a readable but still convincing way. Regarding China's SREB, I, for instance, underscored the seriousness of the Chinese leadership to implement the SREB by referring to the comprehensive use of "Silk Road" on all levels in the Chinese political administration, media and among Chinese academics which in this case really has been quite unusual. In poststructural terms, I showed that the use of SREB quickly grew into a dominant/hegemonic discourse inside the Chinese leadership's discussion on regional foreign policy (its discursive field). Europe, the EU and Germany in particular are prominently articulated in this discourse and mainly mentioned as potential partners for building up and developing the countries along the Silk Road. Consequently, I argued that German and European politicians not only need to be aware of China's growing infrastructure foreign policy in Eurasia but they also should get actively involved by for instance establishing a Chinese-European Silk Road Dialogue.

It becomes apparent that policy advisors need time to think about arguments for the policy relevance of a

¹⁶ This situation has slowly changed starting from Xi Jinping's visit to Germany in March 2014. Xi also went to Duisburg railway station which marks the ending point of the Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe International Railway. From a Chinese perspective, this connection again underlines that China and Germany are at both ends of the SREB. However, the crisis in Eastern Ukraine somehow dominates the political day-to-day business in Brussels and Berlin which makes it difficult to argue for a greater European or German cooperation with China in countries along the Silk Road (especially when we keep in mind that Ukraine is also one of these countries).

specific event or issue, the identification of “new” topics, as well as for providing meaningful policy recommendations. Furthermore, the analysis of dominant/hegemonic discourses requires a deep knowledge and engagement in the respective area of expertise. It reminds me of Donald Rumsfeld’s famous statement about the lack of imagination in politics. Rumsfeld (2013) pointed out, “Everything seems amazing in retrospect. Pearl Harbor seems amazing in retrospect. It is a failure of imagination.” Hence, creating a *thinking space of imagination* that policy advisors (and that very much includes poststructuralist advisors as well) constantly try to fill is one of the crucial and most difficult (but also defining) tasks of SPA.

Conclusion

Poststructuralist advisors regard themselves and everybody/everything else as already embedded in the (same!) world. Therefore, they always expect to renegotiate or re-articulate political boundaries; they are trained to unfold the specific contexts of arguments by other academics, advisers or politicians and highlight the hegemonic discourses within specific discursive fields such as China’s regional foreign policy. Poststructuralists like to irritate. Being aware of their embeddedness, they question ideas, perspectives or policies that we, academics and policymakers, usually take for granted. They are trained to dissect narratives, unheard voices, and uncertainties of politics. In this regard, poststructural policy advisors are not a contradiction in terms but at the very most a term that leads to a serious debate about the content of SPA. Hence, their interventions and resistance are in many ways a necessary step towards a greater and much needed (scientific) diversity in SPA.

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