


Repoliticising the Coast: A Post-Foundational Commentary on Integrative Governance and Blue Infrastructure

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ABSTRACT

European coasts are contested spaces due to conflicting uses and impacts, prompting the introduction of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and Marine Spatial Planning (MSP). These governance frameworks aim to promote cooperation, resolve conflicts and ensure socio-ecological outcomes acceptable to multiple actors, even as large-scale blue infrastructure projects increasingly transform maritime environments. However, these integrative governance approaches have been criticised for promoting essentialist ‘blue growth’ as a dominant ontological and epistemological lens. Thereby, they contribute to shifting production and exploitation frontiers towards coastal and marine areas, prioritising market-based solutions while sidelining meaningful democratic participation. As a result, structural power asymmetries persist, leading to ongoing ecological degradation and the disenfranchisement of communities connected to coastal environments. Challenging the often-proclaimed inevitability of integration and its technocratic foundation, this paper highlights coastal governance’s inherent yet unseen contingent—and therefore political—nature, arguing for its repoliticisation. Drawing on a post-foundationalist interpretation of political ontology and environmental justice, a conceptual framework is proposed to deconstruct depoliticisation, which is deeply embedded yet hidden in knowledge production around coastal environments. It underscores how dissent and difference can offer productive alternatives beyond path-dependent, growth-oriented approaches by emphasising injustices related to blue infrastructure planning and construction and their uncertain socio-ecological impacts. Illustrative case studies from the Spanish Mediterranean coast demonstrate how environmental justice movements around blue infrastructure projects, and their counter-narratives can disrupt depoliticisation and help to establish more just, and sustainable coastal environments.

1 | Introduction

European¹ coastal areas are increasingly the centre of conflicts over land use and environmental impacts. Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) and Marine Spatial Planning (MSP) have been developed to address these challenges, aiming to ensure sustainable governance through cooperation and the inclusion of different coastal actors (Jarvis et al. 2015; McKenna et al. 2008). Although both ICZM and MSP share a focus on

land-sea interactions, their definitions and responsibilities are complex and vary across time and place. However, critics argue that both approaches to governance have led to the privatisation and exploitation of coasts, fostering unequal power dynamics around marine spaces and resources (Bennett 2019; Clarke and Flannery 2020; Nichols 1999).

These processes are linked to an enduring neoliberal agenda in which shifting property regimes in liberalised markets lead to

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'dispossession through accumulation' (Harvey 2003, 73), which means reduced access to coastal space and livelihood opportunities for financially less powerful communities, driven by economic and political interests (Hadjimichael 2018). Critics refer to these post-political governance approaches as depoliticising and tokenising decision-making, reducing meaningful participation, and maintaining top-down control by elites (Swyngedouw 2010; Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). This perspective views integrated governance, such as MSP and ICZM, as strategies for legitimising and naturalising neoliberal regimes, masking structural inequalities and rendering alternatives seemingly impossible (Flannery and McAteer 2020; Tafon 2017, 2019). In doing so, neoliberal governance becomes a dominant reality where actors embody and enact depoliticisation in the everyday production of coastal space through its governance.

Despite claims of sustainability, these governance approaches have not ended the ongoing decline of coastal ecosystems and the disenfranchisement and discontent of local communities. In fact, the ever-increasing and densifying use of marine and coastal areas for economic purposes enhances uncertainty about the impact on notoriously complex ecosystems (Lewis and Ernstson 2019) and often fosters dissatisfaction with governance. This highlights and reflects the persistent yet often obscured presence of dissent and difference that can challenge even the most dominant social orders, creating opportunities for alternative political realities (Mouffe 2005; Saleh and Landau-Donnelly 2024). These alternatives could re-emerge through debates around blue infrastructure, broadly defined here as the human (re)shaping of coastal landscapes (using the built environment, transport, industry, and network infrastructure, as well as adaptive structures to protect the former, such as breakwaters and jetties) (Ido and Shimrit 2015). Areas 'where water is both a vital asset and a dynamic natural force' (Lewis and Ernstson 2019, 3) thus become increasingly accessible within physical-material networks, which extend into cultural, political, and social contexts. These shape human experiences, societal structures, and their interaction with the environment profoundly (Larkin 2013).

In Spain, the coastline, particularly in the Mediterranean region, has significant ecological, social, and economic value. However, the integrative measures proposed by responsible governance approaches, which aim to secure sustainable blue growth, are sometimes disputed. The relevant coastal space legislation ('Ley de Costas') and land use planning mechanisms, as well as the 2023 Maritime Space Management Plans ('Planes de Ordenación del Espacio Marítimo (POEM)'), are criticised for lacking specificity, which makes enforcement and penalties difficult. Other criticism targets superficial and flawed coordination functions that fail to address structural power imbalances, competing interests and social-ecological problems at the Spanish coast. Notably, the coast and its complex interplay of land and sea influences are dispersed across various, more or less integrated governance approaches (Ariza et al. 2016; Larruga and Rodrigo 2023).

Hence, although the large-scale development of ports, marinas, and coastal urbanisation is promoted through blue infrastructure growth initiatives, which are ostensibly balanced by

integrated governance, these initiatives continue to harm coastal spaces. These impacts are both environmental, such as habitat loss, coastal erosion, and stress on marine ecosystems, and social, including gentrification, displacement, and more profound disputes about what constitutes the coast and who is entitled to it (de Andres and Barragan 2017; Fraguell Sansbelló 2023; Navarro-Jurado et al. 2023). These competing perspectives and a growing sense of systemic shortcomings have led to broader political conflict, making the Mediterranean coast a relevant example of the need to rethink integrative governance.

This paper argues that neoliberal governance behind such framings constructs a dominant ontology—of '[...] what can be said to exist [...] about the ultimate nature of reality' (Sullivan 2017, 222)—of the coast that perpetuates power asymmetries and produces differently experienced injustices. However, when strategically mobilised against, these injustices can disrupt dominant power structures and open up spaces for alternative models of governance beyond blue growth. The theoretical framework employed here draws on post-foundationalism, political ontology, and environmental justice to deconstruct the foundations of coastal governance and provoke a repoliticisation of the coast that recognises its inherent political nature. By highlighting the role of dissent and difference enforced by movements of local communities in coastal environments, the paper suggests that repoliticisation can serve as a subversive strategy to challenge growth-oriented neoliberal governance by contrasting the mainstream success narratives of neoliberal capitalism and techno-innovative efficiency (Scheidel and Schaffartzik 2019).

The first part elaborates on post-political governance and oscillates conceptually between 'politics' and 'the political'. In terms of post-foundationalist geography and political ontology, coasts are then conceptualised as negative spaces (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2023), where multiple, ever-changing realities constantly undermine any attempt at ontological dominance. Drawing on Clarke and Flannery's (2020) framework of governance modalities, the paper further explores how depoliticised governance manifests itself in integrative approaches to coastal governance. The second part assesses socio-environmental conflicts using Mouffe's (2005, 2013) notion of agonism, emphasising the value of productive dissent and difference. Finally, repoliticisation is introduced to reintegrate different and dissenting roles to challenge dominant governance ontologies. To this end, illustrative cases from the Spanish Mediterranean coast are used throughout the text, highlighting the importance of a pathway to overcome hegemonic neoliberal regimes and create more just and sustainable—political—coastal spaces.

2 | Understanding Post-Political Governance Through Post-Foundationalism

Critical scholars have noted a divergence between the objectives of integrative approaches and the realities of local conflicts. In such cases, socio-ecological harms are not averted by integration; instead, they are compounded by the prevailing neoliberal consensus-making processes, characterised by a lack of political engagement and a top-down approach (Clarke and Flannery 2020; Nichols 1999; Tafon et al. 2021; Tafon 2019).

Arguably, actors have internalised this depoliticised governance, which subverts long-term governance strategies and everyday decisions (Beveridge 2017; Sullivan 2017). As articulated by Sullivan (2017), who invokes the Foucauldian term, depoliticisation has become the ‘episteme’ of contemporary governance: ‘The self-reinforcing grid of assumed or a priori knowledge of reality that infuses and permits sense-making’ (223) regarding the nature of the coast and the way it should be governed. The concept of depoliticisation is rooted in the post-political debate within social science, which characterises the unchallenged nature of neoliberal governance and the pervasiveness and inevitability of specific forms of political-economic organisation, notably free-market capitalism (Swyngedouw 2010). In this commentary, we propose a post-foundationalist reading of these political-economic developments, which, as we argue, enables a dominant perception of reality in the governance of coastal spaces.

Post-foundationalism draws theoretical inspiration from the philosophical works of Badiou (2018), Rancière (1999), and Lefort (1988), centring on the distinction between ‘la politique (politics)’ and ‘le politique (the political)’ (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2023, 482; Pohl and Swyngedouw 2023, 4). This thinking centres on an oscillation between the two, whereby a constant foundation of society is simultaneously impossible yet subject to continuous founding attempts. The political involves the absence of a foundational, comprehensive and universal basis for societal existence, as well as the lack of a social or historical imperative (Marchart 2000, 52) for its presence or even—, as Swyngedouw (2011a, 2011b) asserts—‘the non-existence of society, [...]’ (373) *per se*. From a post-foundationalist perspective, it can be assumed that there is no uniform, unchanging foundation for the coast, regardless of the concepts applied in integrative governance. Instead, it too is situated in a political arena, in which contingency and conflictuality capable of challenging any founded social order are inevitable.

In opposition to this, the domain of politics, otherwise termed ‘policy’, can be considered a stabilisation of societal constructs arising from the aforementioned void surrounding society (Swyngedouw 2011a, 371). In the context of politics, the objective is to reduce complexity by establishing regimes of order and stability around a social reality. These regimes are manifested in institutional and procedural configurations, as well as in the everyday choreographies and negotiations of policy-making (Swyngedouw 2014). Politics can be empirically substantiated within the domain of ‘actions, strategies, and assemblages of governance’ that exercise control and maintain shared understandings (Marchart 2013; Swyngedouw 2011a, 373).

This foundation thus establishes an inevitable common-sense reality, which will be referred to as a dominant ontology here (Marchart 2010). In integrative governance approaches, the coast is founded on an ontology that uses a particular set of politics, relying on the logics of Cartesian spatiality, technological epistemologies, and reductionist legal frameworks to create incontestable dominance. This can, for instance, be achieved through the use of geoscience technology, which facilitates the conceptualisation of space as abstract, measurable, and separable into discrete, attainable, and interchangeable surfaces for diverse applications and interests. These conceptualisations

configure maritime space as a neutral, gridded container that exists independently of social-material relations and juridically establishes distinguishable boundaries between land and sea (Ntona and Schröder 2020; Tsilimigkas et al. 2018).

The present contribution presents the argument that the politics underpinning integrative approaches result in the integration of coasts into neoliberal commodification and infrastructure allocation. This is not a genuinely new development, but rather part of longstanding patterns of mercantilist, colonial and imperial capitalisation dynamics, all based on the conception of marine space as available, enclosable and therefore exploitable. Different infrastructural arrangements act as entanglements of private and public actors that mediate access, extraction, or conservation of resources, thereby operationalising enclosure (Ceglia et al. 2025). In this context, the prevailing ontological framing of the coast through legal and spatial logics in governance represents a continuation and fulfils a pivotal depoliticising function: It reconfigures the inherent political decisions regarding the definition of the coast as neutral, technical, and technocratic choices. This process engenders an unstable boundary between the political and the social, economic, or ‘domestic’, that is, non-political (Rancière 2011, 4).

Through this conceptual boundary, actual political contradictions are reduced to problems to be managed through the politics of (self-)proclaimed experts, legitimised through participatory processes that narrowly define the scope of possible outcomes in advance (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014, 6). The depoliticising of these contradictions means beneficiaries of the status quo can portray other opinions as illegitimate, egocentric, extreme or dysfunctional, thereby naturalising and strengthening their interests. While disagreement is still possible, it is limited ‘[...] to the choice of technologies, the mix of organisational fixes, the detail of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of their timing and implementation not with respect to the socio-political framing² of present and future natures’ (Swyngedouw 2011b, 78).

This relates to ‘capitalist realism’ with which Fisher (2009) describes how capitalism and its concomitant interwoven social, political, and economic relations form the contemporary, unchallenged mode of social reality, within which systemic criticism is effectively delegated to a theoretical space that is practically impossible to occupy. This impedes or even eliminates the possibility of conceiving other alternative and plural realities beyond capitalist logics (Sardao and Silva 2024). From the standpoint of post-foundationalist theory, the prevailing ontology embodied by neoliberal narratives that prevail around coastal governance is regarded as a significant factor in the perpetuation of present-day contradictions. A study of urban and infrastructure projects in the Mediterranean region revealed that local communities often embrace and perpetuate universal narratives espousing economic (blue) growth, despite the presence of conflicting outcomes and ambiguous democratic assurances (Navarro-Jurado et al. 2023, 26). Such narratives are known to express and reciprocally ‘embody certain ideas about the world and its dynamics’ (Blaser 2013, 548). Furthermore, they ‘story’ human interaction with materiality, while narratives are themselves enacted in the performance of the everyday environment (Ibid). Focusing on the mechanisms of integrative governance approaches, we aim

to demonstrate in the following how prevailing neoliberal ontologies manifest themselves through specific narrative and practice modalities within politics.

3 | Modalities of Depoliticisation in Post-Political Coastal Governance

By extending and adapting the seminal research of Clarke and Flannery (2020) and their comprehensive MSP analysis to the enmeshed land-sea conditions of the coast and its communities, we identify four distinct depoliticisation modalities as contributing to uncontested neoliberal, post-political governance within integrative approaches. Per the aforementioned theoretical understandings, these are regarded as narratives and practices that actors engage in during quotidian governance decisions, thereby contributing to the reproduction of a dominant post-political reality of the coast.

First, the neoliberal perspective on who constitutes a legitimate 'stakeholder' can be identified here, as it excludes dissent as a disruptive force. The governance emphasis on consensus within a predefined, hegemonic framework results in a restriction to conforming positions, thereby yielding outcomes that are only marginally adjustable (Clarke and Flannery 2020). Raco (2014) contends that, in contrast to the notion of empowering communities, the concept of real agency is retained by technocratic experts and selected policy partners. This technocratic-managerialism constitutes a second, integral component of depoliticised governance, wherein experts are perceived as preeminent, elitist figures, and environmental concerns are regarded as knowledge gaps to be addressed through enhanced data collection and spatial planning optimisation (e.g., via GIS modelling) (Clarke and Flannery 2020).

It is essential to recognise that the aggregation of data can provide a more nuanced understanding of the uneven impacts of governance in coastal areas, thereby enhancing the political. Indeed, it is evident that the critical examination and reflection on survey instruments, objectives, and researchers' positionality can profoundly influence the framing of an issue, (re)produce social justice claims and subvert depoliticised positions through the provision of quantified evidence (Nost 2020, 108). Nevertheless, as data collection, processing and interpretation are conducted within societal power structures that often serve to perpetuate specific interests, modelling technologies and modellers themselves may be subjected to biases. Furthermore, despite the inevitable uncertainty of predictions (especially in dynamic socio-ecological and maritime spaces), data are frequently (un-)intentionally and uncritically transferred into ostensibly neutral, evidence-based political decisions, thereby rendering modelling an entity behind decisions without democratic legitimisation (Hastrup 2012, 6; Whatmore 2009, 587).

For instance, there are examples of how MSP has been implemented with exclusion or marginalisation of the needs and specificities of less powerful actors, such as small-scale fishers from nearby coastal communities (Trouillet 2019). Davret et al. (2023) describe the increasing use of geoportals, which provide and process data for different actors within integrative approaches, are more of a facade rather than the participatory intervention

tools they claim to be. Consequently, they do not contribute to the collective imagination of alternative futures; instead, they provide data to 'see' and know what has already been planned (12). Clarke and Flannery's (2020) work provides a compelling illustration of this phenomenon as the third modality. They observe that technological solutions are frequently prioritised over acknowledging and addressing the political dimensions of marine user conflicts and negative cumulative impacts resulting from the industrialisation of marine environments, driven by blue growth paradigms.

Fourth, when considered in conjunction with the time efficiency focus and output fixation characteristic of capitalist modes of operation (Raco 2014), this phenomenon gives rise to path dependencies, thereby hindering decision-making from being a rational process of selecting optimal actions. Path dependency is defined as occurring within the confines of bounded rationality. This is to say, it is a rationality that is limited by temporal, knowledge and cognitive boundaries (Clarke and Flannery 2020). It is also characterised as a focus on selecting actions that are adequate to suit the purposes of decision-makers, as opposed to being optimal. Consequently, structural governance reforms that challenge the prevailing system will be abandoned in favour of established, small-scale solutions and actions (Kelly et al. 2018). This is exemplified by the ongoing problem of coastal erosion, which is impacting large parts of the Mediterranean coastline, with the Ebro River Delta being the most drastic example. Reservoirs created for hydropower production along the Ebro River have trapped sediments that would naturally replenish the delta at the Mediterranean. Instead of holding the dam operators accountable and releasing sediments, the government opts for 'incremental adaptation at the site of climate impact (coast), which, at times, requires executing small-scale land expropriations' (Zografos 2017, 49). Without profound structural changes, downstream communities will remain more vulnerable to erosion and flooding risks, thereby endangering biodiversity and cultural heritage in the Ebro Delta (Mariano et al. 2023).

By extension, this dynamic illustrates what Swyngedouw (2011b) describes as the techno-managerial eco-consensus: the illusion of progressive change that calls for radical transformation while simultaneously safeguarding the existing order and ensuring that no significant alterations are required. This dynamic can be observed in the smart destination model in Spanish beach urbanisations, which promotes digitalised management and planning methods as pathways to ostensibly sustainable urban and tourism renewal. In practice, however, the techno-optimism and e-technocracy herein often reduce sustainability to fragmented local initiatives and place excessive faith in data, without sufficient structural transformation in governance, potentially leading to depoliticised urban planning that reproduces inequalities (Gomis-López and González-Reverté 2020).

However, from the standpoint of post-foundationalism, it is argued that this consensus through depoliticising modalities is ultimately unstable because of the very conditions of the coast. In the ensuing chapter, the objective is to elucidate this matter and expand the current theoretical framework to encompass a hitherto underexplored aspect of the more-than-human geography of the coast (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2024, 90). It is argued

that the dynamic interplay between humans and non-humans along the shoreline gives rise to (political) ontologies that are in a state of constant flux and hold the potential to challenge the prevailing governance structures.

4 | Political Ontologies of Coastal Materialities

The coastal system and its ever-changing materialities, which interact with a web of manifold socio-environmental relationships (Van Assche et al. 2020), form a highly contingent space. Ever-changing bio-physical conditions between land and sea complicate conceptual fixations, and make it difficult to define or stabilise how people perceive, use and relate to the coast (Döring and Ratter 2021). This becomes clear, for example, when one considers the ambiguities between institutions regarding the sometimes parallel and sometimes mutually dependent integrative approaches, and inconsistent concepts surrounding coastal governance in legal policies (Alterman and Pellach 2020, 2022). Effectively, due to this material and conceptual fluidity and the in-betweenness of nature/society and land/sea, a single fixation on what the coast is, remains difficult despite any governance effort (Choi 2022, 3). Döring and Ratter (2018), with reference to Thrift (1996), describe the coast as multiple, meaning coasts are highly relational and produced spaces brought into being through multifaceted social, economic, cultural, scientific and aesthetic human practices with materialities (171).

Multiple coasts, where ‘humans, non-humans and objects interact in entangled ways in the construction of reality’ (Aspøy and Stokland 2022, 121), are thus hybrid object-subjects that break established concepts. Steinberg and Peters’ (2015) notion of ‘wet ontologies’, for example, seeks to move beyond such genuinely land-bound accounts by conceptualising the ocean as a voluminous, material, and dynamic assemblage whose fluidity unsettles fixed categories of territory, subjectivity and temporality. In their later work, they rethink the ocean as processes of extension beyond itself and the shoreline, which transcend into terrestrial elements, imaginations, and perceptions, such as atmospheres and weather systems, affective landscapes, and relational practices (Peters and Steinberg 2019). This perspective enables us to reconceptualise coasts as dynamic border zones that emerge variably within processes of ocean extension, rather than as stable margins. We are particularly interested in the interactions of (non-)humans within and across this extension, seeking fruitful conversations between fluid ontologies and the groundlessness that post-foundationalism emphasises. In other words, something that is constantly being expanded beyond itself cannot be firmly founded but opens continuous political potential.

Based on this thinking, coastal concepts are not a fixed line, but a negative, inherently incomplete space whose materialities and conceptualisations are continually dislocated (Marchart 2007, 139) as the littoral only exists in this ever-changing process of extension. Much like a coastal space, ontologies herein are not pre-given or enduring facts; they are multiple and ‘brought into being, sustained and allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices’ (Mol 2002, 6). Even a dominant, depoliticised ontology of coastal governance can be disrupted through ontological uncertainties arising from the intersection

of infrastructure projects with dynamic maritime ecosystems, and their shifting materialities (Van Assche et al. 2020). Especially during the early planning of blue infrastructure projects—‘where nobody can truly be in the know’—such uncertainties can generate disputes over facts, knowledge, and competency, destabilising established governance arrangements (Lewis and Ernstson 2019, 6). Building on Foley et al. (2024), a broad understanding of infrastructure, including the more-than-human, is necessary to examine these ontological tensions, and reveal the power dynamics and ethical responsibilities inherent in coastal governance.

Arguably, this contrasts the claim of approaches like ICZM and MSP, which position themselves as adaptive and universally beneficial but, at their core, do not go beyond a fixed and exclusive, hegemonic neoliberalist governance. Instead, they subject coastal space to a rapid and geographically expanding capitalisation embedded within a broadly accepted and uncontested blue growth paradigm (Hadjimichael 2018). This is constantly reproduced through planning and management practices, inscribed into governance politics and transferred through technology into new digital ontologies that contribute to how the reality around a coast can be known and enacted (Fairbanks et al. 2019; Tafon 2017). As a result, socio-environmental conflicts and the associated dispossessions and marginalisations have increased on shorelines. For example, blue growth strategies, ‘to ensure growth in a space where great opportunities exist for exploitation by expanding industries’ (Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020, 2), continue to be central elements of the neoliberal European Union (EU) maritime policy despite critics calling out their enhancing of ecological problems, forceful privatisation and unequal rights redistribution (Said and MacMillan 2020). Lepoša and Knutsson (2024) show that this type of EU marine and coastal governance (embodied by MSP legislation) can marginalise alternative experiences and knowledge that are oftentimes embodied, narrated and subjectivised processes at the encounter of (non-)humans at the coast. Such exclusions create openings for contestation, as local communities and recreational users alike assert relational, place-based understandings that differ from top-down governance narratives.

We conclude that this dynamic can give rise to local or regionally perceived injustices, which, in turn, can foster resentment and symbolise the potential for profound change. This assertion is further substantiated by the observation that ‘justice concerns are elementary parts of place-based conflicts’ (Agyeman et al. 2016, 332), a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly evident along the Spanish coastline. In many cases here, the development of urban areas and infrastructure through the tourism industry has had a significant impact on the reshaping and destruction of socio-ecological landscapes. This has resulted in an increased level of societal awareness and criticism of such projects, despite their promotion as containing high socio-economic significance (Frías 2016; Navarro-Jurado et al. 2023; Prieto López et al. 2021). Hence, infrastructure projects and planning processes, while designed to implement hegemonic governance logics, thereby become sites of ontological contestation, offering the potential to recognise multiple, relational and materially grounded ways of knowing and inhabiting the coast.

5 | Reconfiguring the Role of Conflict

Conflicts and controversies are often perceived negatively, primarily because they have the potential to escalate into violence, which can, in turn, harm environmental sustainability and human well-being (Tafon et al. 2021). Accordingly, modalities of integrative governance approaches, as previously described (Clarke and Flannery 2020), aim to balance this by fostering consensus-building within interchangeable spatial surfaces and designing designated areas for various uses and interest groups. While acknowledging the dangers of extremes, this shift in perspective aims to illuminate the productive aspects of conflict while examining its underlying trajectories. Soliciting the underlying trajectories.

Our standpoint here is founded upon a robust post-foundationalist interpretation of contingency and conflictuality: When the argument for their inevitability within any societal constellation is accepted and the political reintroduced, they can undermine social orders 'by disrupting, challenging, and dislocating existing hegemonic forms' (Pohl and Swyngedouw 2023, 4). With Mouffe (2005, 2013), conflict is considered here to be inherent to any genuinely democratic system in which dissent and differences between different groups cannot be wholly eradicated, despite all policy endeavours that aim to stabilise a societal foundation. Difference and dissent, we argue, are inscribed and expressed through differing (political) ontologies of the social(-ecological) environment. The concept of a harmonious and thus necessarily consensus-seeking, society—a notion frequently espoused by liberal and neoliberal theorists—effectively overwrites productive societal differences, thereby establishing a forcefully equalised consensus (Martin 2013, 6). The concept of the political, however volatile, that the given reality could be different, can never entirely disappear because different realities, for example, of the environment, will always simultaneously exist (Borpoudakis 2019; Mol 2002). The potential for the emergence of alternative realities within the political landscape, even within the context of a seemingly post-political regime is a compelling prospect that merits further exploration. This notion is articulated by Landau-Donnelly and Pohl (2023), who state that the political 'haunts [founding] politics even under the most devastating post-political regime' (485).

Under a consensus-focused regime, pressure from conflicting factors without opportunities for democratic articulation may continue to simmer resulting in political apathy and reduced participation, which can destabilise democratic legitimacy (Mouffe 2013, 7). In the absence of an outlet for such debates, political interventions and confrontations may be redirected towards national, religious, ethnic and other essentialist identifications, or non-negotiable moral values of equity and freedom (Mouffe 2016, 21). Consequently, the politics of antidemocratic forces that channel 'displaced' political problems and apathy into populist strategies can benefit (Žižek 2006, 552). In Spain, for instance, the extreme right-wing party 'VOX' is appropriating an eco-nationalist discourse from conservative parties that purports a pristine 'real' ecology as the nation's heritage, which supposedly requires protection against the encroachments of a European, global elite and its unquestionable agenda (Ungureanu and Sanjaume-Calvet 2024, 2). The fact that this is based on heterogeneous, sometimes contradictory

politics that promote commercialisation, deregulation, and neo-liberal growth is obscured behind affective narratives addressing a capitalist-democratic system in crisis, where citizens have a 'sense of loss of personal sovereignty and social-political dis-possession' (Popartan et al. 2020, 10).

These manifestations of dissent and disagreement through consensus disruption reveal, in sometimes drastic and democratically and environmentally disadvantageous ways, the incompleteness of depoliticisation. At the same time, they refocus on the ineradicability of the political and show hints and traces of its potential return (Swyngedouw 2014). Taking the political seriously means that there will always be an antagonism, a construction and delimitation of the other in society that cannot be eradicated, only transformed into agonism. Agonism in this sense means that dissent and differences between groups are recognised and balanced to allow for coexistence and the most feasible collective and individual prosperity (Mouffe 2013).

This perspective on inherent conflict has been theorised and analytically applied above all to war-torn, fractured societies and state projects (see, e.g., the example of Cyprus (Zembylas 2011), Kurdish-Turkish relations (Rumelili and Çelik 2017) and Northern Ireland (Bramsen 2021)). However, it can also be applied to more subtle, less violent conflicts over the environment in the European context. For instance, Tafon et al. (2021) emphasised the significance of agonism and put forward a coherent conflict transformation model, grounded in co-produced, power-sensitive knowledge generation. This model draws on the historical roots of conflicts to establish institutions capable of balancing pluralistic values and interests. We agree that only through agonistic conflict inclusion, regimes of sense-making that are harmful to democracy and nature alike can be undermined, bad institutional arrangements behind decision-making challenged and knowledge and expertise redistributed (Lewis and Ernstson 2019, 7; Tafon et al. 2021, 2).

We aim to stress the importance of agonism as a return of the political by referencing environmental justice movements on the Spanish coast, where activism is being consolidated. Movements on the Costa Brava have formed broad, long-lasting coalitions linking environmental protection with effective political advocacy and governance change. By consistently mobilising against unsustainable tourism and infrastructure development projects, local actors forced authorities to engage in more transparent and participatory planning processes. These movements contributed to the institutionalisation of mechanisms for consultation, public debate, and conflict negotiation, whose availability was previously limited (Rufi et al. 2023). We interpret these findings as an example of governance that has become more agonistic, as competing interests between developers, residents, environmental groups, and policymakers are now more openly articulated, debated, and addressed, rather than suppressed. The case of movements highlights the importance of repoliticisation for the agonistic resolution of systemic challenges in decision-making and mediating ecological impacts related to urbanisation and infrastructure development (Delponte et al. 2023; Nuss-Girona et al. 2020). In comparison, coastal systems in the Valencian autonomous region are more vulnerable due to a paucity of social movements and hesitant governance, which leads to promptin to more negative socio-environmental impacts through increasing

urbanisation and infrastructure allocation (Sánchez Cabrera and Ferrandis Martínez 2025).

6 | Paradigm Shift: The Need to Repoliticise the Coast

The aforementioned arguments have underscored the need to reevaluate the inevitable conflicts inherent in the multiple ontologies surrounding coastal materiality. We argue further that these conflicts can disrupt and destabilise the dominant ontology of neoliberal coastal governance. The coast, as previously discussed, is a hybrid, relational space where socio-material practices constantly unsettle fixed categories of land/sea, nature/society, and governance/territory. At this juncture, coastal communities construct their ontologies around injustices caused by the predominant neoliberal governance approaches through everyday practical engagement with the ever-changing coastal space. Our ontological and relational approach departs from expectations of a major upheaval that revolutionarily overturns in favour of everyday, embodied practices and processes of resistance that have an erosive effect and can slowly undermine dominant structures (Darling 2014; Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2024; Temenos 2017). In fact, we consider the injustices experienced in everyday encounters with the coast as central to prompting reflection on existing conditions and, thus, to a political awareness of the need for change, which is transformed into a broader organisation of lived alternatives (Brossmann and Islar 2020). Instead of neoliberal discourses around ego-centrism, competitive individualism, reformist practice and the depoliticising modalities of integrative governance, there is a necessity for shared awareness of the structural conditions that cause injustices and the depoliticisation that obscures them (Bogadóttir 2020, 113).

We highlight the role of broader social movements, born from—and mobilising around—perceived injustices, which, to return to post-foundationalist terminology, shift meaning to create a structure that destabilises the prevailing order and rebuilds another (Lluis 2023, 66). This perspective aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), who contend that social movements can ‘bring forth new subjectivities that can politicise social relations or spaces that were previously unconsidered from a political standpoint’ (in Kenis and Lievens 2014, 539). Consequently, grassroots movements originating from coastal communities are seen as key enablers in repoliticising the injustices experienced in the context of coastal governance (Tafon et al. 2021).

Much like the manifestation of depoliticised ontology in narratives, repoliticisation by movements must take the form of counter-narratives. These are defined as narratives constructed in opposition to depoliticising narratives while using coherent reference points (Bamberg 2004). Counter-narratives draw on elements of discourses and reinterpret them to expose the problems inherent in the dominant reality, revealing possibilities for alternative interpretations and solutions (Tambakaki 2014). Thus, a compelling counter-narrative must formulate an alternative political project that takes up existing discursive structures and connects them to its objectives. After all, dominant social orders have inscribed themselves in every aspect of social life,

which is why ‘contingency must also always operate through this [...], it must break open symbolic orders, patterns of practice or materialities, mobilise them differently’ (Lluis 2023, 66). Only in this way can a counter-narrative move beyond policy critique and towards a reconfiguration of reality (Decreus et al. 2014). It is argued here that effective counter-narratives might be built out of perceived injustices to accomplish the deconstruction of a given order, mobilising a broader public as the essence of the political, which in turn might affect dominant ontologies and provoke changes in governance.

In this context, repoliticisation can be defined as an ontological intervention by organised social movements, arising from the practical encounters between non-humans and humans at the shore. This intervention resists the depoliticising tendencies of dominant governance frameworks such as ICZM and MSP. Consequently, repoliticisation can be seen as a popular response to the post-political condition, signifying the strategic reintroduction of the political into domains where its presence has been foreclosed by a status quo that presents itself as either neutral or inevitable (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2023, 485).

One of the most important contributions to this debate comes from Blakey (2024), who criticises the interchangeable use of the terms politicisation and repoliticisation, as well as the inadequate conceptualisation of the latter. While politicisation broadly denotes the process of rendering issues open to contestation, Blakey emphasises that repoliticisation must be understood as a practice oriented towards undoing the effects of depoliticisation: ‘If depoliticisation is the process of trying to disavow political change, then it follows that repoliticisation is the process of reinstating the possibility for political change’ (Blakey 2024, 5). It is not merely the initiation of new political disputes but the deliberate reintroduction of disagreement into spaces where appeals to technical neutrality, consensus or inevitability have muted conflict. In this sense, repoliticisation can be grounded in everyday acts, practices and discourses that expose and contest what has been naturalised as unchangeable or where structural conditions have been obscured (Palonen et al. 2019, 265). This relational orientation highlights repoliticisation in our reading as an ontological operation through which the dominant reality around coastal governance, as being merely technical, inevitable or beyond debate, is unsettled and opened up for alternative realities (Escobar 1999). Such a move marks a shift from the narrowly understood political realm of agenda-setting to a more dynamic and contested realm of discourse concerning the very conceptualisation of knowledge, reality and value (Beveridge 2017).

We base this on the repoliticisation of environmental justice movements, which has been shown to expand ontological openness, recognising injustices initiated by blue infrastructure projects as structurally rooted in the overall governance approach. As Blakey (2024) notes, ‘repoliticisation is akin to removing the barricades, unlocking the door, or otherwise creating the climate for political activity to occur’ (8). Thereby, repoliticisation operates as a preliminary stage to an institutional conflict in which decisions are debated and taken, as repoliticisation means first and foremost, conceiving of something as political, from where real controversy, beyond the choice among a set of predefined adjustments, has been eliminated. In this context,

repoliticisation can be regarded as both an academic critique and a strategic-movement practice, representing a refusal to accept a dominant ontology of the coast and unalterable paths of governance. Instead, movements that repoliticise instigate a persistent reminder that ‘things could always be different’ (Lluís 2023, 63). In the quotidian encounters between humans and the shifting materiality of the coast—where infrastructures meet unpredictable ecologies, and knowledge is incomplete (Lewis and Ernstson 2019) – there lies a generative potential for alternative narratives of governance, space and coexistence, when movements engage effectively (Saleh and Landau-Donnelly 2024, 1633).

In contrast to the assumptions of integrative approaches, that seek to reconcile and neutralise this, we identify a potential for more agonistic governance through the repoliticisation of the coast. The governance envisioned here is attuned to conflict yet is capable of accommodating contestation without resorting to domination. It is a system in which differing coastal realities have the capacity to coexist and engage with one another without becoming violent (Lowndes and Paxton 2018). Schubert (2021) posits that such a system must be supported by institutions that are critically self-reflective, adaptive and grounded in a commitment to reciprocal freedom in the negotiation of plural, contingent realities that are ever-present and ineradicable in coastal spaces. From a post-foundational perspective, this can be regarded as the long-standing democratic ideal, encapsulated by the delicate process of maintaining political engagement without reproducing new hegemony, even within well-intentioned, progressive frameworks (Lluís 2023). The potential of such a repoliticised system becomes evident in heavily urbanised coastal areas in Spain, where a more agonistic governance of the environment has consolidated within institutions and contributed to higher ecological quality and overall territorial sustainability.

As Navarro-Jurado et al. (2023) explain, movements at multiple locations on Spain's Mediterranean coast have played a crucial role in transforming coastal governance by resisting large-scale tourism developments that threaten both ecological integrity and cultural landscapes: In Valencia, the ‘El Saler per al poble’ movement began with minority voices of biologists and environmentalists, gradually gaining support from neighbourhood associations, professional groups, and the media to stop and even dismantle infrastructure and initiate coastal governance focusing on restoring and maintaining dune ecosystems. Likewise, on the Costa del Sol, the ‘Another Maro and Nerja Is Possible’ platform contested the Plan Larios urban development planning, advocating participatory planning, protection of agricultural and natural land as well as an alternative tourism model. Around the Mar Menor, social movements have activated large parts of civil society and secured legal recognition for the heavily polluted lagoon, thereby creating a juridical precedent for the rights of nature in Europe (Giménez and Ortuño 2024). In summary, these cases illustrate how sustained efforts have contributed to the promotion of deurbanisation and responsible tourism projects, ecological regeneration, the protection of natural spaces and the implementation of innovative legal measures. Through increased political participation and the fostering of both reactive and preventive environmental justice, these practices have contributed to higher ecological quality and overall

territorial sustainability in the long term (Delponte et al. 2023; Navarro-Jurado et al. 2023).

7 | Discussion: Is Another Governance Possible?

This contribution addresses the concept of coastal governance as a complex, both materially and ontologically, shifting terrain. The coastal environment, characterised by fluid boundaries, socio-environmental entanglements and dynamic materialities, resists stable or universal governance solutions and their dominant ontologies (Peters and Steinberg 2019; Steinberg and Peters 2015; Van Assche et al. 2020). Attempts to manage these spaces through integrated governance frameworks such as ICZM or MSP frequently obscure this beneath technocratic and depoliticised narratives, grounded in neoliberal blue growth paradigms (Hadjimichael 2018; Tafon 2017). However, it is essential to acknowledge that through the diverse socio-material practices in coastal spaces, multiple ontologies inevitably come into conflict with each other (Mol 2002; Choi 2022). These factors can contribute to the continuous destabilisation of the technocratic assumptions, opening friction and spaces for contestation. From a post-foundationalist perspective, these phenomena can be interpreted as manifestations of the political that have been marginalised within contemporary governance.

It is argued that the concept of repoliticisation is particularly salient in the context of ongoing socio-ecological deterioration, which is perpetuated by the inherent ontological tensions of the political coast. These tensions are obscured within the dominant ontology of neoliberal governance. Drawing from post-foundational theory, we understand repoliticisation not as a return to politics within the given dominant ontology, but as a collective ontological opening that foregrounds contingency and challenges the illusion of neutral or complete governance frameworks (Blakey 2024; Jong 2023). Rather than accepting depoliticised governance as inevitable, repoliticisation highlights unresolved conflicts and multiple realities that exist in the negative space of hegemonic orders. Drawing on Rancière (2011), this process involves reconfiguring what was previously viewed as social, economic, or domestic as political, thereby disrupting established categories and power arrangements that incorporate critique into their modalities to maintain dominance (Clarke and Flannery 2020).

The discussion has demonstrated that repoliticisation in the coastal context is not merely a theoretical possibility, but a tangible political potential emerging from everyday practices. These practices occur at the intersection of human and non-human relations, where infrastructural changes, ecological shifts and institutional inconsistencies evoke political responses, often unacknowledged or subsumed in dominant governance narratives (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2024; Lewis and Ernstson 2019). Here, repoliticisation becomes visible as a ‘haunting’ (Landau-Donnelly and Pohl 2023, 485) of the dominant order, surfacing wherever taken-for-granted truths are challenged or made visible by social movements.

Repoliticisation, therefore, fulfils two interconnected functions. Firstly, it renders invisible or suppressed issues in governance (such as the structural causes behind ecological and

social harms) publicly visible; secondly, it articulates these issues as open to contestation (Palonen et al. 2019). This dual role is pivotal in understanding how political agency transcends the confines of institutional actors and formal decision-making arenas, often overlooked in integrative approaches. As Saleh and Landau-Donnelly (2024) emphasise, alternative political imaginaries often emerge in spaces and moments where dominant narratives fail to capture lived experiences and material transformations. Through repoliticisation, coastal spaces are reimagined not as fixed geographies governed through pre-defined frameworks but as 'negative spaces', meaning inherently open, incomplete, and subject to re-articulation by multiple ontologies (Escobar 1999; Marchart 2007). Furthermore, the process of repoliticisation needs to be understood as an ontological opening through its capacity to disrupt the naturalisation of dominant neoliberal ontology in governance, thereby affirming the possibility of alternative realities (Lluis 2023, 63). This is particularly significant in the context of coastal governance, where strategies for blue growth, despite claims of inclusivity and adaptation, often serve to exacerbate ecological degradation, forced privatisation and social marginalisation (Ertör and Hadjimichael 2020; Tafon et al. 2021).

The repoliticisation of the coast has the potential to offer a means of resistance to these developments by creating a public arena conducive to the emergence and integration of plural, contested, and situated knowledge within governance practices. It has been argued earlier that this enables an ontological shift by recognising the multiplicity of coastal realities and the contingency of all political orders. From this perspective, the coast is not merely a space to be governed but a terrain of ongoing political struggle where governance is not finalised but continually contested, reimagined, and negotiated. The post-foundationalist theoretical perspective employed in our commentary unveils the purported integrative approaches, such as MSP and ICZM, and their failure to acknowledge the political dimension as contributing factors to adverse socio-ecological consequences on the one hand, and the erosion of the democratic system on the other. It is from these considerations that we derive our argument, namely that there is an urgent necessity for repoliticisation and the introduction of agonism within coastal governance.

8 | Conclusion

Drawing on a growing engagement with post-foundationalist thought, this contribution presents a critical commentary to rethink the neoliberal depoliticisation of coastal governance. As demonstrated above, the political nature of coasts has been eroded through the implementation of a neoliberal governance model, dominated by expert knowledge and consensus-making processes that prioritise conflict avoidance. This model has infiltrated integrative approaches, such as ICZM and MSP, leading to a shift towards renewed neoliberal governance of European shores. These realities are subject to depoliticised governance that claims universally beneficial and inevitable blue growth. Considering the naturalised regime of politics, a shift away from governance that harms the socio-ecological fabric of the coast in favour of market interests is not to be expected, as the political is dismissed or appropriated in relation to other realities.

However, it has also been posited that the inherently political nature of coastlines should be recognised, as their fluid socio-material configuration always entails the potential for disruption and political opportunities for multiple realities. The repoliticisation of environmental justice movements, based on the inevitable injustice effects of neoliberal blue growth, is considered essential against this post-political condition. Backed by case study findings, repoliticisation poses a challenge to the prevailing ontological order by employing coherent and linkable counter-narratives that address perceived injustices and their structural causes in naturalised neoliberal governance of the coast. Subsequent to this occurrence, alternative approaches may be implemented, or at least discussed, that potentially bring about a more democratic, just and sustainable way of governing the coast.

While the limitations of this text as a mere commentary, devoid of empirical findings, are acknowledged, the resources drawn from literature and examples are regarded as a catalyst for re-evaluating ecological decay and its unjust social consequences along the coast. As demonstrated, the necessity and potential of repoliticisation based on the interwovenness of governance with daily life and practices in coastal spaces are numerous. Consequently, the arguments presented herein can be interpreted as a call to action, aimed at educating and mobilising the democratic public, both within academic institutions and in the broader society, regarding the issues and opportunities for action concerning neoliberal governance, which is masked by prevailing integrative approaches to coastal governance.

We see clear potential to extend this into regional, national and even international mobilisation, thereby facilitating the exchange of experiences and addressing greater layers of governance, such as EU institutions and regulations. Comparable developments have previously been observed in the domain of drinking water (Van den Berge et al. 2022) and in the realm of urban rights, as exemplified by the 'Fearless Cities' movement (Russell 2019). Both movements were characterised by a questioning of neoliberal depoliticisation in the EU, the creation of counter-narratives, and the introduction of alternative, public, and democratic governance approaches. In light of the recent resurgence of anti-democratic forces in Europe, often mobilising around socio-ecological uncertainties and democratic flaws, Mouffe (2016) argues for the strengthening of political movements, in a literal, post-foundational sense, as a necessary response.

We also consider it imperative to engage with the political, given that blue growth-inspired coastal governance will be subject to increased top-down, internationally or nationally organised infrastructure interventions, including port expansions and large-scale renewable energy transitions in the future. The argument will be advanced here that the multifaceted impacts of climate change, such as those on the Spanish coast for marine ecosystems and coastal communities, require an expansion of integrative approaches beyond their traditional scopes to include a stronger focus on social justice (Calado et al. 2025). We hope that the critical commentary from a post-foundationalist perspective presented here will help to prevent the reproduction of past shortcomings in integrative governance by adopting more agonistic strategies. Otherwise, we are concerned that socio-ecological

inequality, submerged turmoil, and support for anti-democratic parties will become more challenging to resolve. These, at the same time, risk long-term ecological damage to already highly pressured coastal environments and further societal apathy, creating negative loop cycles. With post-foundationalism, however, we argue that reinvoking the political means ‘hopefully’ articulating ‘[...] the ever-present possibilities for things to be otherwise’ (Saleh and Landau-Donnelly 2024, 1640).

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the opportunity to contribute to this Special Section on ‘Blue infrastructures: mapping the visual while unpacking the unseen’. They thank the editors for their efforts in realising this publication and for their support and also express their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive and insightful feedback. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ While integrative governance like MSP and ICZM is practiced globally, our focus on the European Union in general, and the Spanish Mediterranean coast specifically, is deliberate rather than exclusionary: The emphasis arises from (our knowledge of) the empirical accessibility of governance practices in the EU and its regulatory apparatus, which received considerable criticism for its neoliberal, post-political approach towards the environment and maritime space in particular (Apostolopoulou et al. 2014; Tafon 2017). As neoliberal depoliticisation is a central part of our post-foundationalist critique, the European Union (EU) provides particularly fertile ground for examining integrative governance. At the same time, we recognise that coastal zones beyond Europe are likewise contested spaces where competing uses, ecological pressures, and (political) ontologies intersect. Our choice of the Mediterranean here thus serves as a case to illustrate dynamics with potential resonance across diverse coastal spaces. Importantly, the commentary’s main intervention lies not in mapping one region exhaustively, but in advancing the argument for the repoliticisation of coastal governance.

² In the following, it will be explained that this ‘framing’ manifests as a dominant reality perception around governance that can be conceptualised by looking at (political) ontologies of coastal space (Sullivan 2017).

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