

# On Transversality: For a Reproblematization of the International in IPS

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In this article, we invest in the conceptual development of transversality to establish it as the key analytical tool for examining the international from the perspective of international political sociology. We engage in this work for two main reasons. First, to strengthen IPS as a field with unique concepts that facilitate a new understanding of international relations, serving as more than just a common ground for various critical perspectives. We believe transversality is one of the key concepts that shape IPS's approach to international issues and which remains underexplored in our field. Our second motivation concerns the challenge of exploring the potential of transversality to conceptualize the international in an alternative manner. As transversality has largely been mobilized descriptively, IPS has struggled to sustain a critical engagement with the international as a problem. This limitation has contributed to a tendency to presume the obsolescence of the international and to replace it with ostensibly "alternative" spatialities that often reproduce the global as an unexamined background condition. We propose transversality as a concept capable of reactivating the critical purchase of IPS by overcoming the slumber into which "the problematization of the international" has fallen over the past 20 years.

Dans cet article, nous nous investissons dans le développement conceptuel de la transversalité afin de l'établir comme l'outil analytique clé pour examiner l'international à travers la sociologie politique internationale. Nous nous engageons dans ce travail pour deux raisons principales. Premièrement, renforcer les IPS en tant que domaine aux concepts uniques, facilitant une nouvelle compréhension des relations internationales et servant de plus qu'un simple terrain commun pour diverses perspectives critiques. Nous pensons que la transversalité est l'un des concepts clés qui façonnent l'approche de l'IPS face aux questions internationales et qui reste encore peu exploré dans notre domaine. Notre seconde motivation réside dans le défi d'explorer le potentiel de la transversalité pour conceptualiser l'international de manière alternative. Nous soutenons que, puisque la transversalité est restée en grande partie une notion descriptive dans la plupart des activités intellectuelles du domaine, l'IPS échoue dans sa critique de l'international, succombant souvent à l'illusion de l'obsolescence de l'international et, par conséquent, adoptant des formulations de bon sens de spatialités « alternatives » qui présument invariablement le global comme condition de fond pour des processus et phénomènes auparavant appelés « internationaux ». Nous visons à con-

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tribuer à une discussion sur le potentiel crucial de la problématisation de l'international comme remède au sommeil critique dans lequel l'IPS est tombée au cours des 20 dernières années.

En este artículo, invertimos en el desarrollo conceptual de la transversalidad para establecerla como la herramienta analítica clave para examinar lo internacional desde la perspectiva de la sociología política internacional. Realizamos este trabajo por dos razones principales. Primero, fortalecer la IPS como un campo con conceptos únicos que facilitan una nueva comprensión de las relaciones internacionales, sirviendo como algo más que un terreno común para diversas perspectivas críticas. Creemos que la transversalidad es uno de los conceptos clave que moldean el enfoque del IPS ante cuestiones internacionales y que sigue poco explorado en nuestro campo. Nuestra segunda motivación se refiere al reto de explorar el potencial de la transversalidad para conceptualizar de manera alternativa lo internacional. Argumentamos que, dado que la transversalidad ha permanecido en gran medida como una noción descriptiva en la mayoría de las actividades intelectuales dentro del campo, el IPS no cumple con su crítica a lo internacional, sucumbiendo a menudo a la ilusión de la obsolescencia de lo internacional y, en consecuencia, adoptando formulaciones sensatas de espacialidades 'alternativas' que invariablemente presumen lo global como condición de fondo para procesos y fenómenos anteriormente denominados 'internacionales'. Nuestro objetivo es contribuir a un debate sobre el potencial crítico de problematizar lo internacional como remedio para el letargo crítico en el que ha caído 'la problematización de lo internacional' en la IPS durante los últimos 20 años.

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### Introduction

The very first writings that introduced the field of International Political Sociology (IPS) (Bigo and Walker 2007a, 2007b) define problematizing claims of the international by working cross-disciplinarily as one of its lead themes. On its own, this can be interpreted as a rather uninspiring statement. International relations (IR), as a discipline, has consistently had a significant interdisciplinary focus, often conveyed by presenting it as a field that merely appropriates its intellectual tools from other disciplines. It also rigorously examines what it means to be international, whether through definitional, disciplinary, or problematizing approaches. However, IPS aimed to offer something distinct in its critical examination of claims regarding the international.

“Once one is ready to reject a world imagined as divided into mutually exclusive territorial states, without accepting too easily the idea of a long march towards a global world adjusting politics to the condition of a global market, the problem of what the international is today becomes a mesmerizing subject matter. The line of thought of international political sociology is born from this willingness to reopen the question of the international” (Bigo 2017, 24).

Revisiting “the international” in IPS takes place in a context that expresses a strong skepticism about the global, but without simply reasserting the international along the eternal oscillation between liberal and realist ideas of interstate politics, and the realist squeezing out of “the social” from “the international” (Bigo and Walker 2007a, 2007b). How then does IPS engage with the problematization of the international after the global?

Transversality is one of the concepts through which the reopening of “the international” in a “post-global era” has been expressed in IPS. To give a few examples: Marieke de Goede titles her afterword in the *Routledge Handbook of International Polit-*

*ical Sociology* “Transversal politics” (Guillaume and Bilgin 2017). The edited volume taking stock of IPS and its transdisciplinarity is titled “Transversal Lines” (Basaran et al. 2017). Tobias Liebetrau and Linda Monsees organized a collective discussion piece in *International Political Sociology* on researching Big Tech, cutting across material, institutional, and disciplinary boundaries under the heading “Transversal politics of Big Tech” (Monsees et al. 2023).

Transversality is not without its history in IR. Yet overall, it remains a rarely used concept. Some notable exceptions can be found in the works of David Campbell, Richard Ashley, and Nevi Soguk (Ashley 1989; Campbell 1996; Soguk and Whitehall 1999). In IPS, however, it is one of the concepts that names its defining analytical project of challenging bifurcating or dualistic conceptual frameworks, such as global/local, state/society, culture/nature, and human/matter. It also calls for analytics that operate across or beyond boundaries, borders, and limits, introducing concepts that entice us toward different understandings of the arrangement of relations. One of its most common usages describes how processes and practices “cut across” levels, scales, and boundaries through which conventional understandings of world politics are logically and spatially represented. Despite its importance for the field, transversality has had a limited impact on IPS’s conceptual efforts, except for Bigo’s past persistence in engaging with the notion in his research on fields (Bigo 2016, 2017). Otherwise, IPS often retained the classical formulation, and now rather dated, notion of the “modern international” to ground its research program (Walker 2010).

The critique of the dominant topographies of IR was an important element of Bigo and Walker’s (2007b) presentation of IPS. Here, we will retrieve their suggestion to rethink the international transversality by means of alternative topologies that convey an orientation toward thinking in terms of connecting lines rather than interactions between or across exclusionary bounded entities and levels.<sup>1</sup>

But how do we conceptualize connectedness transversally? Transnationalism refers to lines connecting objects, ideas, people, organisms, and services as they move across international borders. The discontinuities that define the modern international, however, continue to function as the condition that gives significance to the lines—the challenge of borders by moving across. Transversality offers something different. It combines the topographical codifications of the international with a topological spatialization. The international is, for us, a composing force that organizes proximity topographically through hierarchically arranged levels and territorialized sociopolitical insides and outsides. In other words, it is not a particular level or a discrete system that is more than the sum of the smaller systems it contains but a mode of sociospatial organization of difference and proximity. We develop a conception of transversality that examines the morphogenesis of sociospatial arrangements that arise when the hierarchical and horizontal divisions and exclusions of the modern international are fractured by the (de)formation of proximity in the process of spatial objects and relations in motion. Transversality synthesizes relatively stable formations from within trajectories of continuous differentiation, rejecting a transcendentalism that generates the synthesis from an external point. Such a transversal synthesis is disjunctive in that the continuous differentiations that emerge from relations in motion, while relatively fixed, entail immanent possibilities. We will draw on Deleuze’s and Deleuzian works to introduce such an analytics of transversal morphogenesis and disjunctive synthesis, exploring how it deforms the sociospatial codifications of levels and insides/outsides, that continue to organize the problem of the international, without requiring the vertical top point of “the global.” In this sense, transversality does more than connect lines. It is the dy-

<sup>1</sup>Alvina Hoffmann puts it as follows in the conclusion of her discussion of the unsettling of the reason of state in law and IR and the uses of the concept of transnationalism: “Ultimately, the aim is to unsettle the limits of a spatial politics of boundedness, evoked through conceptual references to the international and transnational, with a politics of connectedness” (Hoffmann 2022, 808).

namic vector that disorganizes fixed formations, creates heterogeneity and defines the international as a field of differentiation.

In this article, we invest in the conceptual development of transversality to position it as a key analytical tool for problematizing the international from the perspective of IPS.<sup>2</sup> We engage with this work for two main reasons. Firstly, as a contribution to the consolidation of IPS as a field with its own distinctive constellations of concepts that render a new understanding of international relations. We believe that transversality is one such defining concept of IPS' problematization of the international and that it has yet to receive the attention it deserves from our field. Our second motivation is to face the challenge of exploring the potential of transversality to think about the international differently. We believe that, because it has remained a rather descriptive notion in most intellectual endeavors in the field, IPS comes short in its critique of the international, often falling into the lure of its obsolescence and, consequently, adopting common sense formulations of "alternative" spatialities that invariably assume the global as the background condition for processes and phenomena once named "international." We wish to contribute to a discussion about the (still) potential value of problematizing the international as an antidote to the relative critical slumber into which "the problematization of the international" in IPS has fallen 20 years after its inception. The question of the international remains significant. The organizations and practices that have been coded "international" as well as the codification itself continue to do significant work in the present. Just open any news site on its world politics pages, and the happenings of "the international" are right there in the contention over borders, migration, multipolarity, the United Nations, diplomatic crises, war, and so on. By fracturing several key analytical tools through which these codifications operate, IPS has posed itself a serious challenge in how to analytically consider the relations that remain defined as international and that have been studied under the heading "international relations" for a considerable time. Analytics of transversality is our proposed answer for engaging critically with the international in IPS.

### The Emergence of Transversality in IR and IPS

As we approach transversality in IPS from within a lineage of problematizing the international "after the global," let's have a closer look at this trajectory. The notion is frequently associated with references to levels and scales, both from a spatial and analytical point of view. In its most neutral form, it designates processes that link actors or phenomena located in different places, constituting a transnational sphere where certain kinds of interactions—less determined by statist or sovereign logics—occur. Several critically oriented authors, however, began to invest in the notion with a more transgressive character, expressing more profound changes in world politics (e.g., [Ashley 1989](#); [Campbell 1996](#); [Soguk and Whitehall 1999](#)).

<sup>2</sup>In this article transversality, as a concept, acts primarily on a set of puzzles concerning the sociospatial composition of relations referenced through "the international" and its counterpart "the global." However, transversality has also been developed in relation to other leading themes. In Feminism, for instance, the prevalent usage pertains to subjectivity, subjectivation, and modes of activism that operate through multipositioning ([Yuval-Davis 1999](#)). A posthuman agenda connects it to questions surrounding the relationship between humanity and developments in science, among other topics ([Ferrando and Braidotti 2019](#)). When exploring the possibilities of dedisciplinizing knowledge, transversality relates to distinctive modes of conducting transdisciplinary work ([Basaran et al. 2017](#)). Situating the concept within the specific IPS lineage we have chosen thus establishes some of the terms of the analytical lure of the concept—how the abstractions attract attention to something significant, to a distinctive commitment ([Stengers 2008](#)). Employing another lineage will rely on a similar orientation toward displacing a conceptual focus on lines of separation, emphasizing connections and moving away from analytics that work with bifurcating concepts (e.g., man/woman, international/domestic, humanities/natural sciences, culture/nature). However, the thematic and contextual organization of the claims that are problematized—the what of the knowing—will lead to a different conceptual lure. We take as the focal point the problematization of the international and how a transversal morphogenesis of objects in motion works it. It foregrounds analytical puzzles that derive from the sociospatial form(s) of the international, rather than the question of subjectivity or transdisciplinarity.

This is the case of [Roland Bleiker \(2000\)](#), who, in his book on the fall of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, tells us that transversality not only denotes diverse political transformations but also appears as a response to the need to rethink how international relations have been theorized ([Bleiker 2000](#)). Bleiker's work is situated in the time when international critical thinking sought to understand and analyze the changes in world politics at the end of the last century. His study of the role of dissident movements in Eastern Europe in precipitating the end of the Cold War exposes the insufficiencies of the debates of the time to account for impactful ongoing phenomena. He conceives of the dissident movements that precipitated the fall of the regimes of real socialism as transversal because they were able to cross national borders and articulate their struggles in transnational spaces that, in his view, were constituting a social and political sphere on a global scale. But the passage of movements from a more restricted level to a sphere where there was more freedom of organization and combination of forces did not occur through jumps between levels but rather through the interweaving of practices and strategies of different actors (state, non-state, etc.) and the unraveling of the apparatuses of surveillance and control in a context where the distinction between the fields structured by the Cold War became diffuse. Bleiker draws on critical geography to develop his analysis without resorting to the levels that defined the topography of the international but instead to indicate how different transnational and domestic processes allowed the interpenetration of culture, economy, and ideologies of a plurality of countries. In this sense, globalization radically transformed the way in which dissent generates human agency, and we must understand transversality as an expression of the broader changes produced by these processes ([Bleiker 2000](#), 31).

For Bleiker, transversality thus meant an alternative to the geopolitical imagination and the levels of analysis that informed the controversies opposing systemic and endogenous factors as explanatory strands for the end of that world order. It appeared in struggles that did not obey the divisions between internal and external and their separations between local, national, and global spheres. The dissident movements in several central and eastern European countries in the late 1980s were a transversal phenomenon in the sense that they manifested “a political practice that not only transgresses national boundaries but also questions the spatial logic through which these boundaries have come to constitute and frame the conduct of international relations” ([Bleiker 2000](#)).

The emphasis on challenging spatial logics makes transversality different from transnational analyses that looked at cross-national relations and communications between social movements facilitated by organizational and technological innovations. The latter introduced what resembled a global civil society as a distinct level of world politics but did not challenge the topographic organization of the international in levels and inside/outside distinctions (e.g., [Lipschutz 1992](#); [Shaw 1994](#)). Bleiker's view, shared by many other exponents of the critical turn, instigated instead new possibilities to rethink the international. Its importance as a theoretical innovation cannot be overstated in the context of vigorous questioning of the divisions between levels as constitutive of the “modern international,” reinforcing the critique of the sovereign ideal and its fundamental separation between the internal and the external.<sup>3</sup>

Bleiker's work on the concept of transversality found little explicit following in international critical thought over the next two decades. However, it is interesting to note that the “transversal sensitivity” present in his analysis resonated with an essential part of the critical research agenda in the following decades. We find it, for example, in the dense literature on social movements in the context of globaliza-

<sup>3</sup>Currently, an interest in planetary processes and issues is animating similar questions. For example, Milja Kurki defines her project of redefining relations in this planetary context as follows: “I try to elaborate what it might mean to think relations without things, relations as ‘thoroughgoing’ and relations as ‘shooting through’ levels of analysis” ([Kurki 2020](#), 17).

tion processes, as well as in the rapid expansion of studies on the multiplication of borders and their practices of control, and the complexity of migratory flows and their modalities of government and resistance. Like Bleiker, these studies faced the challenge of understanding how social and political processes crossed borders and articulated themselves in spaces that combined “local” and “global” logics and forces.

IPS is both an expression of and a significant contributor to the lineage of “post-globalization” analytics.<sup>4</sup> It seeks to circumvent the traps associated with spatial conceptions that break up transversal organizational lines into discrete levels of analysis and reproduce familiar binarisms (local/global, internal/external) or propose their resolution through the incorporation of the multiple spheres of world politics on an expanded global scale. These post-globalizing perspectives were fueled by the many criticisms of the simplifications and reductionisms of the globalisms of the 1990s, whether in their liberal formulations or in their social-democratic strands, such as the Third Way. Without wishing to revisit these debates here, the most interesting elements in such critiques have been to show how the flows that circulated in the different circuits of globalization circumvented the techniques and technologies mobilized to control them and contradicted expectations that they would constitute a new integrated global order. What they articulated instead was a “disjunctive order,” to use a term of Appadurai, consisting of a multiplicity of processes whose effects are, as a rule, unpredictable and ungovernable. How these flows relate to each other generated all kinds of tensions and irregularities irreducible to homogenizing forces that would produce a (global) space that could contain and regulate their “mutual cannibalizations” (Appadurai 1990). In the face of the constant differentiation engendered by such flows (financial, cultural, semiotic, technological, etc.), the uncertain and shaky terrain in which they moved indicated the “fracture” of globalization. The potential for a harmonization of the processes emerging after the Cold War was seemingly lost. In this sense, IPS set aside, from its beginnings, the theoretical propositions about an “epochal” and scalar transition from the international to the global and the neo-modernizing logics associated with them. Instead, it sought to intensify a series of puzzles, one of which has been how to analyze circulations and connections across borders that question both the vertical organization of practices by means of levels and their horizontal extensions.<sup>5</sup>

The concepts and strategies that articulated the fracturing of the global based on integrative dynamics of decentralized structures—such as networks and assemblages (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009; Lyons and Mandaville 2010; Littoz-Monnet and Uribe 2023), as well as studies of global governmentality (Walters 2012) made visible how technologies and processes, in principle disconnected, constituted arrangements for border control, mobility and migration, or security sectors in potentially violent contexts such as peacebuilding operations or natural resource extraction. The focus on these arts of government made it possible to analyze transversal processes of global institutions, national governments, humanitarian organizations, churches, etc., in which certain types of articulations or operations were planned or implemented and which, through sophisticated and complex channels of circulation, connected multiple but different stopovers. Such circuits of circulation of government policies and techniques could range from development projects supported by organizations such as the World Bank to humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR or the International Committee of the Red Cross, in collaboration

<sup>4</sup>Our use of “post-globalization” has to be read from the point of view of the current times. Although Bleiker, Campbell, and Appadurai speak about globalization to identify the processes we refer to as “post-globalization,” over time globalization became codified more explicitly as a distinctive level of government—e.g., in global civil society, global democracy, the global, and the end of the state, etc. In light of the latter codification, it seems more accurate to identify works on conjunctions and disjunctions like Bleiker’s as post-globalization.

<sup>5</sup>In our reading, “the Post-Cold War” and “post-globalization” do not function as yet another set of primary markers of an epochal change, and how a change in “reality” determines a change in the “forms of analysis.” We read them as markers of the intensification of a series of analytical puzzles.

with local NGOs. It was no longer a matter of working with vertical trajectories of transition between higher levels of decision-making and the more molecular ones where practices perform their effects on bodies and materials.

Although Bleiker's work problematized the international and its use of levels, it also demonstrated a lingering pull toward some integrative or organizing whole, i.e., the multiplicity of agencies, circulations, and so on—the many—became analytically connected to an organizing unity—the one—for the analytics to work. For the argument to be supported, Bleiker felt it was necessary to take the additional step of connecting processes of resistance and contestation to the new global dynamic, conceiving a global political space and giving it far-reaching implications.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it is relevant that the emergence of this space resulted from the deterritorialization of finance, communications, and information networks previously located between the borders of national states and that there were forces that acted to integrate them to create the necessary conditions to operate “transversally,” transgressing the dominant practices in international relations (Bleiker 2000). In other words, new forms of dissent and resistance—and their substantive impacts on world politics—emerged thanks to the existence of a global political realm where “levels” lose analytical relevance to become only descriptive indicators of the spaces (local and global) connected by transversal forces.

Compared to Bleiker's analysis, recent research in IPS shows these lines as more mobile, frequently shifting. However, in general terms, the analyses that highlight the dynamism and singularity of the spaces in which flows of power circulate in the turbulent ecology of contemporaneity often “scale up” the rationalities that make possible the governance of processes such as migration or border policing, or the management of logistical chains, referring to global regimes (or forms) that give them some cohesion and persistence (Ong and Collier 2005; Abrahamsen and Williams 2009). In other words, work in IPS reveals a lingering pull to situate analyses of decentralized configurations and processes of power into integrative logics that presuppose or lead to global ordering imaginaries. The dispersion of levels mentioned above seems to be based on spatial dynamics that are subject to some scalar ordering, even while challenging the linearity of the classic cartographies of the international. Attempts to reconcile the reconstitution of the international in the global with the complexity of processes that have been fracturing world politics reflect the persistence of efforts to expand social spaces in order to make sense of multiple logics of ordering, domination and resistance in the contemporary world (Huysmans and Nogueira 2021).

Didier Bigo unveils this issue, criticizing the simplification of heterogeneous chains of power circulation when thought of in scalar terms. In fact, resources and practices follow transversal paths between different social fields formed by articulations between national or transnational sites whose borders are fluid. Struggles and conflicts generate fractures that redefine the connections that make up what Bigo understands by “international,” which is nothing more than the result of processes of conjunction and disjunction of complex dynamics capable of forming new fields of power, often in combinations between dispositions and strategies of heterogeneous social spaces. What interests us in the way Bigo conceives the international is, precisely, his treatment of the social and the political not as types of phenomena whose occurrence and classification depend on the delimitation of spheres with well-defined logics and which can be ordered into “scales” that make up world politics. Its starting point, as well as the one we have adopted in this article, is that of a fractured world, composed of fragments that are not part of a “whole,” but rather singularities that produce compositions that connect multiple relations and that are irreducible to totalizations. The transversal logic of these dynamics is incompatible with the notion of levels, since relations between them require a cohesion that is not

<sup>6</sup>A similar lingering reference to “the global” can also be seen in Campbell's (1996) conception of transversality.

realized in a world where aggregates are ephemeral, and fracture is the primordial logic of the forces that compose it (Bigo 2017).

One of the problems faced by the analysis of the fracture of the international concerns how we can map the circulation of flows that disorganize the different fields of power, setting in motion processes of continuous differentiation. More specifically, the question that arises is to show how objects, actions, and modes of expression escape their arrangements and, by connecting with other formations, generate new effects and performances, no longer contained in their respective fields or “levels.” In addition, it becomes necessary to identify the forces that drive heterogeneous and disjunctive configurations. In Bigo’s analysis, the specificity of certain professional fields produces connections that distance actors from the center (and dominant practices) of fields, generating “centrifugal” forces that enable their overlapping and the “diffraction” of divergent logics through them. Here, transversality opens paths to multiple possibilities and arrangements that do not depend on, or affect, qualitative changes in a world polity that is now globalized. We see new dynamics operating, “deforming” fields that become “elastic” and capable of establishing relations and solidarities at a distance and reconfiguring the “scapes” or ecologies that characterize the fracture of the international.

This approach to transversality as intrinsically associated with arrangements averse to the characteristic closure of social systems and totalities is what we share with Bigo’s vision regarding its potential to rethink the international. His analytical strategy leaves in the background the transition of actors and processes between levels and favors the identification and following of lines that trace transversal trajectories, often erratic, that allow us to visualize the emergence of forces that produce unexpected encounters and relationships in interstitial planes. The international, in this perspective, appears as a series of reconfigurations resulting from these trajectories in constant movement. In other words, such an approach dispenses with the analytical move of including the international within a broader dimension—the global—capable of handling more complexity and intensity of interactions.

### Conceptualizing Transversality through Topology and Disjunctive Synthesis

Rather than simply analyzing how new forces, actors, processes, and flows cut across the fabric of the postwar global order, we propose using transversality to understand how these disruptions actively produce new, interconnected spaces. This approach highlights the creative potential within global fractures, revealing how transversality illuminates the emergence of diverse spatial arrangements.

Differently from the earlier uses of the term, we are less interested in how transversality sheds light on reconfigurations of world order (or sovereignty for that matter) but rather in how to mobilize it as a concept through which we can analyze the intensive differentiations that transformed the international into a more diffused and decentralized arrangement of multiplicities that resists ordering. As a result, transversality, we argue, can be a more effective tool to understand the politics of the contemporary world once it foregrounds relations, connections, alliances, and the divergences that keep reshaping the international.

In this section, we set up part of the conceptual background that will allow us to escape the rigid lines through which the international has been rendered by international thought and make visible the lines that move its continuous differentiation. To do so, we draw on insights from topology to sketch an analytical framework that foregrounds the connections of heterogeneous elements at inflection points that reshape the international. We resort to topology because it focuses on connections in fluidity, that is, in a kind of connection that generates variations and new relations. In this sense, topology may help us to perceive how the transversal line works and to conceptualize transversality more clearly.

We base our argument on two aspects of topological thinking. Initially, we rely on topology's account of nonuniform lines and nonlinear logics to distance ourselves from the hard lines of topographical thinking, which separate the discrete entities that make the modern international. In topology lines are malleable, elastic and rarely straight and stable. The world of the international, conceived topographically, is made of vertical and horizontal lines that organize the social and the political within territorial spaces and logics of discrimination and exclusion. The porous and elastic lines studied by topology connect variable relations and flows generating multiple arrangements in unexpected ways. The nature of these lines is such that they neither separate nor cut across but rather fold and unfold themselves in continuous processes shaping new relations that are not defined by boundaries and not differentiated by separation. We can think, then, of transversality as the line that modulates the trajectory of a fold and, as such, produces new inflections that escape the determinations of the topographies of inside/outside. In other words, the transversal line becomes the vector of folding surfaces, lines, and forces.

Secondly, we rely on topology's concern with complexity and change, as well as with chaos and instability, as a resource to engage with what we see as the unruly multiplicities and deformations of the international seen through the lenses of transversality. Here, again the transversal line works through bifurcations, generating disjunctions. To be clear, hard lines produce disjunctions as well, but of the "either/or" kind, that is, exclusive disjunctions that cut clear limits that result in distinctive and opposed identities, places, social arrangements, and so forth. We are interested, however, in *inclusive* disjunctions, in situations where differences are affirmed even if they appear incompatible. Moreover, these apparently separate and unrelated dimensions are brought into relations that not only preserve but multiply differences.

In the work of Deleuze and Guattari, this process is referred to as "disjunctive synthesis" or, as the encounter of differences that produces heterogeneity. A disjunctive synthesis conveys a relation between terms that are nonrelated or supposedly excluded by the very disjunction.<sup>7</sup> Instead of generating contradictions through negation, we find a positive consistency between elements that are distinct but not separated, each following its own trajectory. The synthesis does not "resolve" the divergence in a higher, unified order, but rather establishes an inclusive relation that "does not exist outside its divisions" (Zourabichvili 2012). We can work, analytically then, with a sectioning that does not stratify in higher and lower or inside and outside but rather creates a dynamic of disjunction (series of or . . . or . . . or) and conjunction (series of and . . . and . . . and), multiplying possible (and always heterogeneous) relations that affirm difference in itself. Transversality works then by connecting in fracturing, or by disjunctions and conjunctions, generating variations in a dynamic that multiplies the trajectories of intensified relations resulting from encounters, approximations, and superpositions. These complex relations are better understood through the topological notions of contiguities, vicinities, and approximations, which express relations between distinct and nonrelated elements, spaces, and forces. The result is a multiplicity of potential relationships that vary according to how different lines fold. Or, put differently, we obtain a transversal composition where the analytical focus lies on the disjunctions and their synthesizing relations rather than on the order-generating contradictions. The disjunctive synthesis "folds differences together such that they never simply correspond or oppose one another" (Widder 2012, 24).

<sup>7</sup>The nonrelation becomes a relation by means of a "reciprocal implication," a relational notion where everything or being implicates all the others. The disjunctive synthesis is also defined as "the suspension, neutralization, or exhaustion of the always-derived distribution that nature and society submit us by 'stratifying' the undivided reality. . ." (Zourabichvili 2012, 169).

*Topological Diagrams: The Mobius Ribbon and the Deformation of the Inside and Outside*

How does topology help us think transversally? Basically, topology allows to think of spaces not in terms of their coordinates in extended surfaces (such as territories of states or regions) but in terms of relations between different spaces that emerge from mostly fluid modes of connectivity. Topological diagrams express combinations of multiple spaces, which can be Euclidean and non-Euclidean at the same time, as is the case of the Mobius ribbon.

The Mobius ribbon is the alternative topological rendering of the international par excellence. It subverts the distinction between inside and outside by means of a very simple operation, the folding of a circle. The result is two defining properties of the ribbon: one-sidedness and nonorientability. The former conveys the idea that despite having only one side and a boundary (the edge of the ribbon), you can cross the surface to “another” side as you move. In other words, you have two sides in a one-sided object in a paradoxical relation. It is a typical effect of topological objects. Differences are generated along the continuous trajectory of its shape. The simple twisting of the circle does the work of creating always different arrangements of connections as you move along the ribbon (Law and Mol 2001).

The second property, nonorientability, expresses the nonlinear character of topological thinking as it disrupts the relation between surfaces and directionality. If we look at the flat surfaces of maps, the grid made of vertical and horizontal lines provides the coordinates for determinable orientations. Orientability is a property of surfaces that allows for the choice of a “normal” vector at every point. If we draw an arrow pointing up on the surface of a cylinder, it will continue to do so as it circles the surface from start to finish. In the case of the Mobius strip, the same arrow will point downward once it completes a cycle of the strip. Not only is orientation indeterminable—as you travel, left becomes right—but it is also always dependent on multiple potential relations that are often unstable. This topological rendition of social relations allows us to see transversality at work. The “two sides” of the ribbon are distinct yet not separated and, more importantly, related in their difference. As the concept of disjunctive synthesis suggests, the two sides converge and, simultaneously, are divergent. Due to the unique shape of the twisted ribbon, distance does not oppose “proximity” but rather articulates divergent points in the curved and twisted shapes of its surface, producing “positive distance” (Cockayne, Ruez, and Secor 2020).

We could say that positive distances are what we observe in Bigo’s analysis of the blurring of the difference between internal and external insecurities in the transformations of the security field in Western Europe (Bigo 2000). In fact, the shape of the field makes it hard to know where internal and external dimensions are situated and how security actors frame their practices and alliances. The fluid relations distributed along the ribbon generate all sorts of unexpected connections between crime, unemployment, drug trafficking, terrorism, and war; and between policing, military forces, surveillance experts, border guards, private security firms, and so forth. In this context, “security is in a process of externalization of the inside and internalization of the outside. . . and [security agencies] don’t know where inside ends and where outside begins” (Bigo 2001, 113). The topological structuring of the field of security in the shape of the Mobius Ribbon reveals a series of ambivalent relations obfuscated by normal boundary regimes. This ambivalence allows for the extension of the reach of security practices in multiple sites—beyond sovereign borders—and for the management of populations by means of an ever-growing diversity of technologies of government, coercion, surveillance, and incarceration. As the divide between internal and external dimensions of security becomes undecided, the roles of the army and police are folded and directed toward a wider and often divergent array of threats ranging from terrorism, migration, and drug smuggling all the way to humanitarian operations. Bigo showed how the intermingling of security problems

expanded the reach and variety of actors invested in combating both the enemy within and without. As a result, the functions of policing and military operations have become difficult to determine, complicating the design and management of security policies and, in a good illustration of the analytical value of the topology of the Mobius Ribbon, making them “no longer directional” (Bigo 2001, 114).<sup>8</sup>

The Mobius ribbon upends the boundary’s ability to separate the internal from the external and subjects such relations to a transversal logic in which what is inside today can well be outside tomorrow. These shifts do not happen, as we are used to see in international studies, as displacements of levels or scales mediated by state agencies or international institutions. It is the successive deformation of the field (of security professionals) that generates the differentiations in their functions, perspectives, and inclusion in either “national” or “European” environments at unexpected junctures. In other words, they are folded in ways that destabilize the geographical directionality of their practices (of surveillance of the enemy, for instance) as well as their “belonging” to the inside or the outside. The field is, at the same time, domestic and international.

Such deformation of the field (in the sense of making it more elastic and variable in shape) implies the action of other forces in addition to velocity variations that lead to changes in speed and trajectory, as is the case with centrifugal forces, which still move within the linearity of Newtonian physics. The passage, or circulation between levels, is better understood as an expression of disjunctions that intertwine elements located in different dimensions, whose arrangement or distribution generates new connections. Staying with the familiar reference of the Mobius ribbon, the most basic deformation of a space or field that expresses the disjunctive synthesis is the fold—the folding of the ribbon.

#### *Topological Formation of Differential Space*

In an interview in 1992, Felix Guattari recalls that the notion of transversality emerged in his work first in the critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, in particular with regards to the need to think about the constant “passage from one level to another” about “how it is possible to pass between heterogeneous poles, and how one can develop abstract machines that are not universal but, on the contrary, move in the direction of heterogeneity?” (Alliez and Goffey 2011, 26). At a later stage, already in collaboration with Gilles Deleuze, Guattari proposed a new formulation of the concept that referred to the connections between processes of deterritorialization, a definition closer to what we have seen in Bigo’s work and to the notion of fracture. In his last book, “Chaosmosis,” Guattari mobilizes transversality to think about out-of-balance systems and their creative potential, whether in everyday life, in society, in science, and, more often, in this phase, in world politics (Guattari 2006). The concept of chaos plays a positive role in thinking about the complexity of series where changes (or divergent repetitions) occur at “infinite” speeds and infinitely small spaces. One of his main challenges was to map complex analytic schemes that he and Deleuze explored in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) involving nonlinear processes that resist fixity and reduction to binary logics. What interests us here is to explore how this intellectual trajectory invites a topological envisioning of arrangements that affirm heterogeneity and resist the reproduction of world orders, or more generally, distributions determined by fixed structures. To be sure, new arrangements can crystallize into innovative modes of domination through supple lines, which have multiplied in contemporary times. However, our concern lies with the critical potency of transversality to disrupt dominant concep-

<sup>8</sup>The Mobius strip has been used metaphorically to conceptualized paradoxical relations as in Bigo’s analysis of the field of border security in Europe. However, for authors such as Mezzadra and Nielson topology is not used metaphorically but rather as the logic that structures arrangements and practices of bordering. The same can be said of Law and Mol’s (2001) analysis on manifold spaces. See also Martin and Secor (2014).

tualization of the international, which are often dependent on hard lines and rigid stratifications.

Critical geographers have, since at least the 90s, helped us to conceive space relationally rather than as a presupposed dimension, a background, or container of objects, bodies, and social relations (e.g., [Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005](#); [Merriman 2012](#)). Their conceptual innovations allowed researchers to analyze an increasing variety of spatial arrangements without having to categorize them according to their position in the familiar Euclidean grid of the international system of states or in the architecture of an emerging global polity. For instance, how were the new social movements of the early 2000s to be understood and situated? A great deal of analysis relied on multiple scales—their organization in networks linking local, national, and transnational groups—as an expression of a “global civil society” that defied interstate restrictions to political action. However, such frameworks remained two-dimensional, only expanding the reach of lines of communication across national boundaries with the extended plane of connections lifted onto another two-dimensional level into a global sphere. Social movements were leveled up into a global civil society where such organizations often faced the difficult choice of either operating globally and risking co-optation by global governance institutions or moving back down and privileging “local” politics and contend with state practices of repression or assimilation (an interesting example can be found in the trajectory of the World Social Forum) ([Mittleman and Chin 2005](#); [Funke 2012](#)). In this understanding, the global and the international emerge as an extended surface with a fixed system of coordinates—the international being more extensive than the national and the global conceived as an extensive network encompassing local agents. These extensions were then verticalized—scaled up—through the larger surfaces containing the “smaller” ones, as a higher-level formation upon which one can operate separately.

Topology does not focus on extensions measured through a set system of coordinates. Neither does it simply map networks. Topology is concerned with the shape spaces take when rendered in more than two dimensions (going from three to four to infinity), how these shapes vary, and what kind of relations they are the expressions of. To put it differently, topology is the branch of mathematics developed to work with multiple dimensions (spaces of different shapes and forms). To do so, it focuses on how these spaces retain their essential properties (roundness, for instance) while changing how they are organized. In this sense, they are especially useful to analyze processes of variation that retain a certain continuity in how they are arranged ([Shields 2013](#), 102).

A useful example of how we can see transversality operate in such fluid configurations can be found in urban studies. In her work about the different ways in which the production of cities takes place in the “global south,” Tereza Caldeira engages with transversality to construct an analytical framework to think about how “heterogeneous urban spaces” are generated in settings usually discarded as sites of innovation ([Caldeira 2017](#)). Indeed, urbanization in less developed areas of the planet is often perceived as either precarious expressions of internationally dominant models such as “neoliberal cities” or “global cities” or, alternatively, as unequal and exclusionary modes of organization of space characterized by informality, lack of basic infrastructure, and absence of state intervention in public policies. Caldeira, on the other hand, argues that “peripheral urbanism” is highly variable and capable of foregrounding processes of constant transformation of cities resulting from the active engagement of residents in their production through creative modes of political engagement.

Unlike more established approaches to urban social struggles, such as the “right to the city,” however, Caldeira deviates from oppositional logics toward transversal ones in which different forces are entangled into usually unpredictable processes of production of heterogeneous urban spaces. Based on studies of expe-

riences in Istanbul, São Paulo, and Santiago, we see how, for instance, formal processes of legalization, occupation, planning, and speculation are always folded with precariousness, irregularity, and illegality (Caldeira 2017, 15). A transversal approach reveals how these logics inform either public authorities or social movements and yield undetermined effects. Take, for instance, how “cycles of land development/regularization/valorization (. . .) entangled the state, investors, and citizens. In the process, state planners and agencies acted routinely after the fact in a way that benefited private developers, improved neighbourhoods and consolidated the rights of residents. We can recognize the same logic in programs of land regularization and slum upgrading” (Caldeira 2017, 9). In other words, these usually quite distinct and opposed logics, such as informality and legalization, are redefined, re-framed, or even expanded as their coherence is unsettled not through contestation but rather by creative engagement that produces variations in their operative effects. What we gain by deploying transversality to analyze the topologies of peripheral urbanization is an analytical strategy that accounts for the multiple articulations involved in making cities, which refrains from stratifying its dimensions into a model that allows for comparisons of types. As a result, Caldeira can foreground the unpredictable movements that characterize a process of constant transformation (Caldeira 2017, 16).

The gains of topology—and the departure from linear geometry—appear in analyses, such as Caldeira’s, based on the overlap of different spaces or compositions that produce new trajectories from indeterminate inflection points. Topologies that modulate the shapes of the social and political arrangements imply, for instance, that the effects attributed to “globalization”—disjunctures and conjunctures—are not the product of the overcoming of limits of the international by “cutting across” levels, but rather the expression of how transversality organizes distance and proximity in complex trajectories that characterize the international as a multiplicity of dynamic fields of different shapes and magnitudes (Bigo 2016).

A topological reading of Deborah Cowen’s (2014) and Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez’s (2018) analyses of logistics and geopolitics offers another example. Such a reading of their work allows for thinking the co-existence of logistical networked (global) spaces, territorialized geopolitical spaces (interstate, international relations), and labor market spatial formations without letting one spatial formation absorb the others and without simply positioning them next to one another as three differently coordinated spaces (or structures or systems) that merely are overlaid upon one another. Such a reading shows how logistical corridors work not just through a network of circulations but also as a territorialized codification of the circulation in a world of interstate rivalry and conflict and a world of industrial relations coded through struggles between productivity and labor rights. For example, a harbor area becomes a frictional space that some states seek to control while remaining part of a corridor of the network of global logistics and a space of struggle between corporations and workers over labor rights. Instead of analyzing these as different surfaces with their own coordinates that exist on top of or next to one another, if we approach the harbor as a topological field, we can see how the folding of the material and immaterial forces is continuously organizing it as a heterogeneous space that is at the same time singular and multiple. The harbor emerges less as a fixed spatial form and more as a site in which flows of a global logistical network fold into industrial relations and geopolitical enactments of interstate relations through multiple inflection points, such as when a new technology supporting logistical efficiency runs into national security concerns and labor right protests. It thus becomes a differential spatial formation, not through integrating three more or less cohesive formations, but through inflection points bringing the three coordination systems into disjunctive proximity.<sup>9</sup> Transversality here considers divergence as an object of affirmation—a positive

<sup>9</sup>See also Hönke and Cuesta-Fernandez (2017).

distance between differences—rather than a negativity of exclusion or opposition (Deleuze 2003, 178). The focus is not on how the divergence among the three codifications gives rise to contradictions that need to be resolved into a single, unified identity or formation—“the harbor.” Instead, the focus is on how the distance between these codifications generates sets of correspondence that create resonances between the codifications, shaping and reshaping life and matter within and around the harbor.<sup>10</sup>

The embedding of such a topological sensitivity in its research program may help explain why IPS is so interested in what can be referred to as “the situated” or, in how specific, everyday processes (such as the introduction of new surveillance technologies and the introduction of new labor practices of resistance) are brought into proximity, fold and reshape—or even de-stratify—the organization of complex systems such as a harbor or an urban site. In Laberge’s words, “transversality is therefore a mode of association which is neither vertical nor horizontal, but moves unexpectedly from one register to another, thus crossing and arranging the different elements in a singular manner” (Laberge 2024, 103). We can see then how topology questions the common sense assumptions that you can account for change by scaling up (or down) existing configurations of the international, involving the system of states in a global sphere that is capable of reorganizing its structures and boundaries, or in other words, of “governing” the international from a global position to solve the complexities of its imbricated dependencies.

Renouncing the ambition to map changes in world politics through a single new set of coordinates (points), we can now analyze how any space is defined “in terms of its relations to other spaces” (Ptlonitsky 2006, 197), how they compose neighborhoods and vicinities in multiple possible ways. The concept of transversality implies a topology composed through the connection between continuous yet different spaces that may or may not cohere and generate a singularity—an event, an inflection point that defines a divergent trajectory (Ptlonitsky 2006). The argument presented here is that transversality is the conceptual tool to analyze how such connections happen and simultaneously generate heterogeneity in the process, subverting logics of verticality and centralization. Transversality, then, relies on an effort to focus on the foldings of decentralized multiple connections that make up the fractured international as an open system incapable of closure by boundaries of function, form, or space (Zourabichvili 2012, 178).

### *Continuity and Differentiation*

Before proceeding further in this reproblematicization of the international, we would like to stress the significance of topology as a “science of continuity” (Ptlonitsky 2006), as an alternative approach to conceive movement through different dimensions in contrast to the common sense notions of scale jumping and its correlate temporal transitions (in the case of the post-Cold War, expanded scale and epochal discontinuity). As mentioned above, transversality is commonly understood as a line that cuts across borders and scales and establishes new connections between processes and actors. One of the difficulties in thinking of transversality this way lies in the assumption that the line creates new relations by means of displacements otherwise unlikely due to the separations (or exclusions) produced by boundaries. Research in IPS has successfully explored instabilities and ambivalences of boundary-making foregrounding movement and porosity that are often not perceived in conventional border studies.

However, such innovative approaches to boundaries, borders, and limits sometimes take logics and dynamics of separation and exclusion as defining properties of

<sup>10</sup>Deleuze speaks of a collection (“un ensemble”) of non-causal correspondences that form a system of echoes, resonances, and resumption, to clarify that the relationship is not one of cause-and-effect or causal necessity (Deleuze 2003, 176).

lines and, therefore, conceive the transversal line as a derivative vector that connects elements across them, preserving the properties of discontinuity that characterize the topography of the international. Perhaps a more productive approach would have the transversal line play the primary role of fracturing limits and boundaries at the same time as it changes the outline of a terrain. As we see in the Mobius Strip, from a topological perspective, the boundary has no function; it is the trajectory of the folded strip that organizes the relations among ants moving on the strip—in one of Escher's renditions of Mobius. Or, taking the rhizome as an example, the transversal replaces a centralized model of organization by decentered multiple connections where the line does not “cut across” levels or lines of separation but traverses them from within, the key being to “grasp things in the middle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

The point of our engagement with topology then has everything to do with its definition as the mathematical study of continuity and connection and how we enroll its aid to rethink the relationalities of the international within processes of differentiation. Transversality relies less on calculation through coordinates than on mapping how it undermines stable organizations, opening the potential for new arrangements of the social field—it traces a path of mutation through new connections. The transversal line has a molecular nature that makes it supple, flexible, dynamic, and unpredictable. It expresses movement rather than displacements from one point to another.

As discussed above, these variations in how different kinds of lines intersect produce not just a blurring of boundaries but also what we could call “zones of indistinction” in which different relations of forces emerge (such as in the fluid events of 1989). However, as we have argued elsewhere, the analytics of connection and continuity suggested here lead us to conceive of change through “little lines of mutation” that, when mapped, allow us to see how connecting such infinitesimal differentiations simultaneously makes and unmakes social formations (Huysmans and Nogueira 2016). The work of the transversal line is not perceived in macro-sociological formations but only as they move the thresholds of intensity in a specific configuration of forces producing disjunctive synthesis. This is why Deleuze considered the molecular line (as well as lines of flight) as “present and imperceptible.” What we can observe is how disjunctions fracture territories and relations, and how they are composed differently. It is from these conceptual insights that we consider the possibility of rethinking the international as multiplicity (Tonkonoff 2017).

How then can we perceive the mode of connection in topological fields where the pattern of relations might be elusive? The composition of space, matter, and forms of expression that coexist intensively in a single plane is connected by folds. Simply put, instead of thinking in terms of separable minimal elements—points, or positioned entities or identities—we think in terms of an infinite number of inseparable folds, which envelop matter and immaterial elements of reality in fluid, elastic, and usual curvilinear shapes.<sup>11</sup> We can say that folds are points of inflection that change in motion and, as eloquently put by Rojas, “ever smaller folds and indivisible relations of distance compose the labyrinth of the continuum” (Rojas 2024, 70).

Here, the notion of topology as the science of continuity becomes clearer as its nonlinear connections establish relations of proximity (contiguity) between heterogeneous spaces, creating disjunctions, flares, and deviant trajectories otherwise impossible in two-dimensional Euclidean spaces. Variation through proximity intensifies movements and produces zones of indistinction or thresholds with “undetermined trajectories.” Topological thinking allows us to analyze how change occurs in continuous arrangements, accounting for the duration of certain relations in the fluidity of composite (or complex) spaces (Martin and Secor 2014). Frichot refers to

<sup>11</sup>For a more extensive explanation of our conception of folds, see Huysmans and Nogueira (2021).

a “topological field of endless self-variation,” and in fact, for Deleuze and Guattari, these complex formations are constantly generating novelty from its multiple connections (Frichot 2013). The shape of spaces produced by such compositions are mostly indeterminate given that they are made of open relations. However, some degree of determination occurs once we can identify the points of inflection (divergence) that generate new configurations. These inflections (which are always present in topological objects) provide a window into the specific mode of connection that enables us to think in terms of continuous differentiation through folds and foldings.

To summarize, our aim with this topological reading of transversality is to understand how things change in continuity and what the trajectories of flows and forces are that bring distant sites closer together and create new spaces, in a manner similar but not identical to Bleiker’s proposal to think about changes in world politics after the Cold War through the formation of a transnational sphere. Our use of topology allows us to see how foldings and unfoldings create specific “arrangements of connectivity” that create new spaces of differentiation and to dispense with levels and extensions within a given system of coordinates. Different formations or compositions do not simply overlap or overlay (e.g., interstate, world, and global civil society) or exist simply next to one another (Martin and Secor 2014). Of interest are the inflections when they partly overlap and fold into one another, creating a multidimensional mode of proximity and coexistence.

### Transversalizing the International

The challenge of rethinking the international through the transversal lies in conceptualizing it not just as a means to escape the disciplining of difference that defines the modern political experience. Rather, transversality leads us to face the international as a radically heterogeneous environment that organizes itself without ever achieving the unity of a system. It asks us to review many of the longstanding notions that inform our way of thinking internationally, most of all, that the constitution of sovereign man and sovereign state established relatively stable grounds on which modern politics unfolds, and how it has defined the limits within which we can think politically and from which escape is illusory (Walker 2010). As developed in the previous section, the transversal allows us to think of relations as immanent to spaces that are not defined by stable boundaries and, as such, not determined by their separation from an outside (either as ideal or as constitutive; either as adjacent or as above-or-below).

This approach is not particularly new. Ashley argued earlier that practices of sovereign inscription emerge to discipline the ambiguities produced by transversal struggles that cannot be contained by boundaries traced in Cartesian spaces. Despite his emphasis on practices of statecraft and boundary-making that controlled transversal struggles, it is significant that the starting point of his reflection on “living on border lines” are disparate and dispersed elements in “wide circulation” that exceed the boundaries of domestic or international and, as such, are framed (or captured) and then ordered and differentiated by the more stratified relations of the international. The move is familiar in the sense that states discipline fractured relations into segmented social wholes that make up a wider world of peoples differentiated “in time and space” (Ashley 1989).

Our focus is not on the operation of sovereign power since, as we have indicated earlier, analytics of transversality are more concerned with how relations of power in all their fluidity produce differentiating effects and deform the spatial organization of proximity in the international rather than with centralizing and dividing logics of sovereignty. In this sense, the transversal is intrinsically hostile to sovereignty (Bigo and Walker’s 2007b; Sauvagnargues 2009). However, two relevant points for our discussion can be drawn from Ashley’s pioneering conceptualizations. First, despite the totalizing effects of sovereign practices, ambiguity persists in the lines that

produce the international—expressed as “grey zones” or “liminal zones” between the levels and on the borders—and, as such, can potentially serve as elements of indeterminate differentiation. Secondly, it serves us well if we take the play of always indeterminate differentiation not just as an expression of excess or resistance resulting from the operation of power, but rather as productive of inflections intensifying disjunctions. To put it differently, we would like to propose that not only are sovereign practices productive (of order and dominant modes of differentiation) but also that transversal relations are as productive, only that they produce disjunctions, not order.

We do not mean to say that state practices fail in territorializing a great many dispersed flows of people, money, signs, and so forth and manage, through different power arrangements (institutional or not) to capture, once again, disruptive forces that threaten security, identity, etc. What we argue is that transversal lines continue to produce heterogeneity even as hardened segmentarities are at work. They coexist in any given composition of forces and are always interfering with the processes of codifying differences that work to unify the social and the political topographically through hard distinctions between inside and outside, above, and below.

The transversal operates not just by connecting dispersed elements but also by allowing them to communicate, putting themselves in vicinity with each other. Transversality is about the continuous (de)formation of proximities, a morphogenesis of social arrangements in continuous movement. To be sure, the transversal is not reducible to the flows, circulations, and lines of escape that disrupt a mode of proximity. A transversal analytics connects things in a plane emerging from a sectioning of multiplicity to create proximities. In that sense, the act of sectioning is at the start of a composition of new experiences (Zourabichvili 2012). David Campbell, for instance, defined the transversal as the result of “increasing irruptions of accelerated and non-territorial contingencies in which . . . flows contest borders, put states into question, rearticulate spaces . . .” (Campbell 1996). Bleiker argues that a transversal analysis must focus on “cross-territorial flows” in order to make visible the agency of dissent in the context of political struggles in East Germany in 1989. While it is important to examine how transversal flows disrupt, or disorganize territorial orders, we would also caution against a conceptualization of the transversal as a process or a force that emerges from the globalization of various types of flows, overcoming the dominant (Westphalian) spatial configuration of the international. In Bleiker’s analysis, flows exerted a transformative force that undermined the restrictive boundaries enabling the reproduction of authoritarian rule in Cold War Europe. Our approach to transversality does not embrace this progressive (or emancipatory) character of fluidity and boundary transgression. Transversality folds flows of dissent with flows of Westphalian authority at multiple inflection points, transfiguring both flows. It keeps divergent flows as both external and immanent to one another. It might be worth noting at this point that the critical leverage of transversality works through analytical interferences rather than a normative directionality. Transversal analytics do not focus on arrangements of connectivity and their transfigurations that are less violent or discriminatory, or, in other words, that transform values in a single normative direction. It provides a toolbox for analyzing the morphogenesis of relations of proximity through folds and the enactment of disjunctive synthesis, which undercuts inside/outside and scalar differentiations as the analytical devices for understanding the international.

What are, then, the dynamics of the processes that reshape these specific configurations of the international? Our perspective follows Deleuzian approaches that conceive the transversal as virtual, as “that which is not given” and yet no less real. While it is not opposed to the “actual”—in fact, it can only be perceived in the process of actualization—it should not be traced from actual states of affairs, as if it were something “other” or “somewhere” else (outside or transcending the actual). The creation of possibilities is always immanent, there is not a world of fixed, stable relations

that at certain junctions is disrupted by the world of becoming. The differentiations described by Bleiker and Campbell can be thought of once the transversal element is incorporated in the analysis of processes of transformation; otherwise, we risk reproducing given states of affairs. In Bleiker's analysis, dissident practices constituted by discursive creativity (poetry) are embodied in the actions of "transversal groups" (new social movements, immigrants) that "transgress boundaries (Bleiker 2000). Here, the virtual dimension is expressed by discursive practices, opening up "gray zones," or zones of indistinction between inside and outside, between "local and global," where new encounters occur, potentializing alternative courses of action, disclosing multiple pathways and bifurcations. Bleiker is quite right when he argues that these transversal processes disrupt the international by creating connectivities that undercut instituted inside/outside distinctions. We just disagree, however, that the international was superseded by a global space and that the discursive practices and regimes are the privileged analytical site that allows us to understand how transversality operates.

The transversal changes the international but does not necessarily transcend it by generating a more extensive sphere constituted discursively. Moreover, as discussed above, an analytics of transversality should offer possibilities to perceive how multiple and heterogeneous spaces emerge from the articulation of both material and nonmaterial elements in complex (topological) terrains. In the example of the harbor in the previous section, the transversal analysis is not about logistical flows and labor rights struggles resisting or escaping geopolitical territoriality but starts with sectioning three codifications of the international that condition the spatial formations of the harbor. The transversal spatialization of the harbor emerges from how the three "sections" partly fold into each other, thereby deforming the harbor compared to how it is represented within each codification (sectioning) and keeping the spatial formation in motion by the immanent disjunctive quality of the proximities created in the foldings of the three codifications.

An interesting illustration of how this works in relation to instituted boundaries organizing relations between fields of practice can be found in Anja Kanngieser's study of political interventions of activist groups in Berlin in the early 2000s (Kanngieser 2012). Her work analyses the deforming of the relation between urban mobility, culture, and politics in the campaigns set up by the network Berlin Umsonst (Berlin for Free). These were uncoordinated and decentered actions to protest against the price of transportation fares and the cost of admission to art exhibitions. Pinker Punkt referred to pink circular signs carried by people in platforms encouraging passengers to gather to travel without paying tariffs. Any commuter could participate, and the campaign was promoted previously through different channels, forming groups of up to fifty people in each journey. The protest against the cost of entry to an MoMA exhibit gathered activists in suits mixing with the guests and presenting fake tickets. These performances created a "self-engendered" collective action through the encounter of individuals who were not part of an organization and had very diverse backgrounds and affiliations—or that did not consider such stratifications as vectors of movement and rather disrupted them in the flow of the encounters.

Even though there was no cohesive ideological or political orientation to the protests, a "platform of collective enunciation" of dissent regarding aggressive capitalization of services and culture, made of temporary, ambiguous modes of organization, tactics, and practices, generated a clear political effect. A new "transversal territory" that articulated differential politics emerged. As the author argues, transversality is a vehicle of rupture and convergence, in a constant state of becoming, that is characterized by ambivalence, mobility, and creativity. Such transversal encounters creates zones of indistinction where coding is always open to diverse determinations (temporary alliances) without ever determining the essence of a collective,

which takes shape in the very movement of the flows of people and create multiple new possibilities of action.

Mostly, the transversal here appeared as a mode of organization that privileged open, ephemeral, and horizontal arrangements between activists and nonactivists, artists and nonartists, and all kinds of people engaged in everyday encounters that unfolded in various divergent trajectories, reminding us of the dynamics of the dissident movements analyzed by Bleiker cited before. To be sure, these encounters were not spontaneous or arbitrary—there were instances of coordination, workshops, gathering points, tactics, and so forth involved in “adding up” or “stacking” collectives in certain spaces. But there was no telling what paths were to emerge from such encounters (Kanngieser 2012).

Thought-provoking processes are at work in transversal relations. We see disjunctive and conjunctive synthesis producing connection and communication while fracturing, disseminating, and bifurcating. In other words, we have syntheses that operate by separating and combining elements as they unfold. Deleuze explains in *Logic of Sense* that contrary to Kant’s synthesis, which operates through limits and negation, the disjunctive synthesis combines by creating differences, by maintaining the decentering movement while their combination expresses itself as multiplicity (Montebello 2008). This is how we would like to suggest transversality works as an analytical device that allows us to see how connections of heterogeneous elements are made possible through the movement of the folds.

Such productivity allows for analyzing inter- or transnational relations between activists, dissenting groups, nonactivists, public servants, and so on without having to place them within a particular level that operates above the national. It fractures conventional understandings and established relations, but it is also productive of dynamics that generate new combinations of forces that reconfigure the international. This is the dynamic Bleiker seeks to capture in his analysis of the fall of the Berlin Wall. New dissident groups disrupt the politics of resistance to the East German regime, producing “grey zones” or spaces of differentiation in which divergent codifications of movement, dissent, authority, and territorial boundaries folded into a disjunctive proximity that blurred not just the given territorial boundaries that organized the world during the Cold War, but also the lines that defined the organization of movements and their practices. The zone around Prenzlauer Berg gathered diverse groups of cultural activists that “ranged from urban punks to rural housewives” and unpublished poets (Bleiker 2000).

While the analysis emphasizes the transversal dimension inherent in the ability to transgress spatial givenness, our reading of transversality would foreground how their politics varied from the oppositional logics of earlier dissenters and broke down the “dichotomy of dissent/collaborator” and their practices of direct ideological critique. In fact, the writings and performances of that generation of artists nurture ambivalence and inconclusiveness, a trait that often was criticized as apolitical but, as Bleiker notes, expressed a subversive refusal of familiar categories of political struggle. This alleged lack of ideological clarity underscored the accusations of collaboration against some leading poets of the Prenzlauer Berg when it became known that the movement was infiltrated by the Stasi and some of its members informed on their activities. Setting aside the moral judgment about the betrayal of prominent intellectuals to the secret police, the presence of informants in dissident movements was practically the norm in East Germany and, as Bleiker argues, did not necessarily mean that they were “ineffective or entirely controlled by the state” since “no form of dissent is ever entirely autonomous from the political practices it seeks to engage or distance itself from” (Bleiker 2000). In fact, it was the openness and porosity of the organization of the different groups that gave them the ability to connect multiple cultural and political spaces and create the “transversal sites of contestation” analyzed by Bleiker; sites that do not need to be united within a more global or other higher-level field but that form and deform in the actualization of

proximities—between national groups, dissent and collaboration, and culture and politics. In this sense, following Guattari, transversality's dynamism relies on the continuous variations produced by the articulation of multiple perspectives.

The decoding operated by the transversal process can unfold into a productive subversion of modes of domination (policing, surveillance, and privatization) as well as reactive dynamics of restratification under new compositions (as in the exclusionary identification of new activist groups, or a new conservative articulation of environmental politics). In other words, although both Bleiker and Kangieser transversalize through the practices of activists, a transversal analytics is not activist-focused, as our earlier reference to Didier Bigo's work, which analyzes relations emerging from security professionals, shows. What transversality does is approximate certain lines that take flight as they resonate and communicate, taking different possible pathways.<sup>12</sup> It is how [Gabriela Valdivia \(2023\)](#) shows us in her account of “how life and oil came together” in the fields of Esmeraldas in Ecuador. What happens when there is a conjunction of oil flows, class struggle, expertise, patriarchy, state nationalism, and urban regeneration in the production of life in the city of Esmeraldas? What are the effects of the transversal exchanges resulting from bringing together oil and the life of the city at different junctures in the trajectory of the oil industry in Ecuador?

At the center of the analysis is the Esmeralda national refinery, a state-owned enterprise, built in joint venture with Japanese and Korean capitals, exploiting the fields on the Pacific coast of the country. After threats of privatization and scaling down of the workforce in the midst of the oil slump in the turn of the century, a new phase introduced by the center-left government of Rafael Correa (2010–2015) relaunched a development strategy based on sovereignty over the oil sector and its progressive value (following the line of South America's “pink wave” during the first decade and a half of the 2000s). The oil industry became the key vector of the “revolutionary” project of the Correa government and was to perform a transformational role in Esmeralda, promoting better education, health, transportation, and wide-ranging urban development of the previously precarious neighborhoods surrounding the refinery.

The newfound convergence between oil and national sovereignty unfolded into productive relations between oil and education, oil and community, oil and infrastructure and oil, and the urban regeneration of the city. As the author argues, the new composition expressed a convergence between “real-life desires of workers and city dwellers and the continued flow of oil” ([Valdivia 2023](#)). New roads, sidewalks, schools, health centers and hospitals, water services, and other improvements in infrastructure were implemented mostly in the neighborhoods adjacent to the refinery, which the executives considered as their “zones of influence.” The integration of these areas through social and urban policies was key in the “revolutionary” coding of the oil/development assemblage, which also performed a sectioning of the alliances with transnational capitals as well as with the military control of the energy sector. Everyday life in Esmeraldas was folded into the different flows of the oil industry, in what concerned health, food supplies, entertainment options, transportation networks, pavement of roads, and the creation of income-generating opportunities, among other services.

As we argued earlier, topology allows us to work with the multiple spaces and flows connecting in Esmeraldas, generating “neighborhoods of coherence” that would suggest a new era of development, but mainly making visible how their conjunction and superposition disorganize the city and the oil/development composition at specific junctures where transversality is at play ([Shields 2013](#)). In other words, a topological approach allows us to map how different lines operate and allows us to

<sup>12</sup>Even if our effort in this article is to explore the critical potential of transversality, it should be clear that both the concept and our own perspective, are normative agnostic.

see consistency as well as the divergences inherent in the kinds of connections focused by a transversal analytics. More specifically, we can see in this example how flows of expertise, technology, logistics, capitalized waste and “toxic life wagers” produce unexpected trajectories in the life of the inhabitants of Esmeraldas as well as in the political economy of oil in Ecuador (Valdivia 2023).

Hence, a transversal analysis of the relations between these diverse series shows how their difference generates communications and divergent paths. Despite the considerable investments in the overhaul of the refinery, the oil produced was too heavy for refinement of light derivatives for export. As a result, the project became dependent on private and foreign supply of NAFTA and produced an excess of sulfur above standard safety levels. Surplus capitals produced by the oil sovereignty revolution were then captured by different elements in the transnational supply chain of the world energy industry, and more than 40,000 barrels a day were turned into waste. Moreover, the excess sulfur was burned into the atmosphere producing periodical showers of “snowflakes,” received with a mixture of enjoyment and distress by the neighboring population.

As with many similar projects of oil-driven growth in South America during the first two decades of this century, the social inclusion they promised was divided into different processes and trajectories that coexisted without generating the cohesiveness and control of state management. In the case of Esmeraldas, the inhabitants of the refinery’s “zone of influence” continued to consider it a “good neighbor” while at the same time suffering from skin rashes, respiratory ailments, and the rise in the incidence of lung cancers, among other vulnerabilities. As Valdivia argues, the “intersecting paths with the logistics of oil flow” continued to mobilize the desires for a better life and self-affirmation of people like Yolanda, who managed to establish her own business, renovate her house and escape an abusive relationship. Correa’s revolution, however, floundered and led to an era of aggressive liberalism and heightened urban violence in Ecuador.

But the failure of a “project” is neither interesting nor relevant to our attempt to highlight what an analytics of transversality may offer. If anything, it tells us that looking into logics of cohesiveness and centrality (of power or logistical chains) is not a productive starting point to understand the relation of life to oil. On the other hand, it does not condone naive conclusions about the disruption of the different flows that compose the oil/development machine. What it does show us is how its continuity functions through connective relations, which are productive in their difference, generating variable inflections as an expression of the communication between adjacent/contiguous elements. In other words, transversal analytics looks into the zones of indiscernibility where heterogeneous flows coexist without separating themselves, instead of privileging ruptures that, supposedly, change the nature of a process or system. What the study of Esmeraldas shows is that conjugation and disjunction continue to fold and unfold while always opening new possibilities of escape.

Valdivia’s analysis brings into proximity a variety of familiar codifications, including global capitalism, class struggle, national politics, and feminist everydayness. She does not organize them by treating each as fixed formations operating at different levels or in a functionally differentiated set of sites that are then brought in relation. Instead, through transversality, we see how multiple sites in the city fold and unfold at different junctures, producing unexpected variations in the composition of oil, urban equipment, logistics, and life. The transversal line works as a vector that multiplies the combinations of “flows and places” in Esmeraldas, bringing water valves, billboards, beaches, roads, effects of belonging and care, expertise, and patriarchy into close and messy proximity and making the state oil project and the city into something else, where lives become lived in and through the workings of what remains a disjunctive synthesizing process. Topologically speaking, we can see how these flows intersect, making Esmeraldas a site of a transversalizing international.

Its strength rests in “simply” exploring living and its conditions through the foldings of multiple decentralized formations that make up the fractured international. In Esmeraldas, these processes come into proximity, undoing the authority of levels in organizing the relations of the national oil industry, the global commodity chains, the different places of the city, and the experiences of those who live in between. Instead of a stacked-up ordering by global capitalism or exclusionary neoliberalism, we find almost infinite variations of modes of living with oil through immanent divergences and multiple trajectories resulting from encounters and approximations.

### Conclusion

Twenty years into the journal, we felt it would be beneficial to revisit how IPS defined its core problematique at the very beginning. At that time, one of its distinct characteristics was to become a site for work that reexamined the problematization of the international after the global. It encouraged this exploration based on a conception of the international as an expression of the fracturing of social and political wholes constrained by modern spatial imaginaries. In other words, it was driven by a critique of attempts to comprehend the radical divergence of (transnational) social and political processes and phenomena by scaling up their spatial configurations to a level where some ordering and/or harmonization could occur—the global sphere. By embracing the persistent heterogeneity of the post-globalizing contemporary and investing in analyzing disjunctions that connect people and things across multiple sites, it opened the problem of “the international” in new ways. Paradoxically, experimenting with such disjunctive readings led to the unintended consequence that “the problematization of the international” in IPS partly fell by the wayside.

In this paper, we explicitly reengage with the invitation to think “the international” anew as a defining element of IPS. We hark back to one of the concepts through which this project was worked out: the concept of transversality. Although it regularly features as a qualifier in the journal, there is scarcely work that develops at length what the concept does. In our understanding, it is a major analytical tool for rethinking the international. In this paper, we focus on how it offers analytics that replace the topographical codifications of the international with a topological perspective. A topological reading is essential to prevent innovative approaches to boundaries and levels from adopting logics of separation and exclusion that view the transversal line merely as a vector connecting elements across them, thus maintaining the properties of discontinuity that define the modern international. Transversality highlights the ongoing (de)formation of proximities as a morphogenesis of spatial objects in motion, aligning with Deleuze’s concept of disjunctive syntheses to shift focus from negativity, limits, and integrative levelling in Kantian interpretations of the international.

To be sure, the field of IPS has pursued and developed such an outlook along different lines of research, analyzing transnational fields, excision zones, borderscapes, occupations, camps, prisons, walls, logistical infrastructures, and networks of different kinds. Most of the time the research escapes their rendering as structured distributions of agents, functions, and strategies in two-dimensional diagrams or maps.

For the purposes of this article, two aspects of this somewhat continuous intellectual engagement have proved most relevant. First, the observation of how crucial it has been to redefine the “problem of the international” by deforming it. Building analytical frameworks using objects such as the Mobius ribbon opened alternative paths to overcome the antinomies of critical thought based on borders, boundaries, and limits and subvert ontological determinations of the inside/outside binary. Second, as a consequence of such topological “deforming,” we can think of relations of distance and proximity as the product of points of inflection in continuous movement instead of separations produced by fixed points and straight lines.

A topological disposition, even when not explicitly articulated, allows us to see how multiple processes unfold, sometimes acquiring a semblance of order and stability only to change at an inflection point. Or, to put it differently, topology enables us to analyze how different spaces and processes intersect and define “neighborhoods of coherence” always within uncertain and unstable lines and moments (Shields 2013). This way of looking at what Appadurai defined as the “disjunctive order” of globalization and its related processes of mutual cannibalization of “scapes” allows to read the fracturing of the global as productive of innovative ways of organizing politics internationally. It is these possibilities of mapping decentralized multiple connections to understand the transformation in the international that we seek to explore using the toolkit of topology. In other words, we draw on topological thinking to conceive of the international as generating multiple and variably connected social spaces that are difficult to grasp through IR’s geopolitical and, more broadly, topographical references.

Similar to Sha, we value such topological reading of transversality as a mode of thinking that respects “the lifeworld’s continuous dynamism, change, temporality, infinite transformation, morphogenesis, superposability, continuity, density and value, and yet are free of or at least agnostic with respect to measure, metric, counting, finitude, formal logic, linguistics (syntax, grammar), digitality and computability, in short of formal structures that would put a cage over all of the lifeworld” (Sha 2012).

In its twentieth anniversary, the journal can show a staggering wealth of groundbreaking research as well as conceptual innovation. Our contribution is a small gesture to push the limits further. Even if in these past few years, one could think that we are past the “problem of the international” and should perhaps forget about it, we have tried to suggest that it might be worth persisting in efforts to find critical potency in the international if we proceed to free it from its boundaries and limits and transversalize it.

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