

# Interrogating the technical/political distinction as cultural fact at the IAEA



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The cultural distinction of technical/political is not only relevant for theories of rational governance but also plays a defining role as a social science analytic. The STS literature argues that distinguishing between politics and technoscience is generally an ideological move, especially for important “state-building” technoscientific projects such as nuclear technologies. This literature asserts that the ideology of the distinction conceals that the two domains are mutually constituting, whether in the idiom of “co-production” (Jasanoff 2004), as a result of “boundary work” (Gieryn 1983), or defined as “technopolitical regimes” (Hecht 1998). This presentation will bring insights from the theoretical contributions on language ideology in linguistic anthropology to bear on the technical/political distinction, examining it—as Gal (2005) has done for the private/public distinction—as an ideology of differentiation both emically and etically. In an attempt to tease apart these entangled concepts, I will show how the distinction is semiotically mediated, drawing attention to the pragmatic consequences of accusations of politicization. I mobilize “bureaucratic objectivity” as a key anchor of the technical/political distinction for projects of technocratic governance, and explore a controversy surrounding IAEA knowledge practices in which the technical/political distinction becomes salient when local nuclear epistemics threaten to crack. I analyze how the distinction is mapped onto people, places, and activities using examples from the IAEA’s Department of Safeguards. I use these examples to point out how our analytic categories can become captured by the pragmatic effects of ideological distinction.

*Anna Weichselbraun is a Stanton Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow at CISAC. She received her PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago in August 2016. Her book manuscript *The Nuclear Order of Things: Bureaucracy and Objectivity at the IAEA* investigates how nuclear safeguards inspectors, bureaucrats, and diplomats at the IAEA negotiate the international and institutional boundaries of politics and technology in their working lives. Her research further interrogates how practices of technical verification are constituted to address problems of the unknowability of others’ intentions.*

**MONDAY**

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Department of Anthropology  
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