not claim that this applies to all Members in all circumstances at all times. However, since tariff concessions and services commitments need not apply to all products and all sectors and may be renegotiated at any time, WTO law is sufficiently flexible to permit each Member to adjust the scope of its commitments to open its market to foreign products and services to its policy constraints.

I would like to recommend to anyone skeptical about this conclusion to take the trouble to examine the factual details of a cross-section of the cases decided by the Appellate Body. In the overwhelming majority of the cases, the measures declared to be illegal by the Appellate Body were the result of regulatory capture and its ruling facilitated the correction of a government failure in the domestic political process. Most of the cases demonstrate that Robert E. Hudec was right when he said that ‘protectionism tends to be traded between legislators as though it were a free good’. In general, the Appellate Body’s ruling made the regulatory capture and the costs it entailed more visible and the legislators, when implementing the ruling, could take a decision on the matter that was more informed and took into account a wider range of interests than the measure found to be inconsistent with WTO law. Moreover, in most cases, the implementation of the ruling tended to redistribute economic benefits acquired by a small but politically powerful group to the public at large. Democracy? Redistribution? I believe that anyone concerned about these matters has good reasons to welcome the corrective influence of the Appellate Body’s jurisprudence.

For these reasons, I believe that the constraints of WTO law on democratic decision making and redistributive policies, and the ideas that the ‘trio of Hayekian’s at the GATT’ developed in the 1970s and 1980s on these matters, are not what Slobodian claims them to be in the final chapter of his book. Slobodian does not merely present in this chapter the perceptions that the demonstrators in Seattle had of the world economic order. He engages in an evaluation of the impact and problems of an institution without, however, examining the law, the jurisprudence, the methods of operation, or the powers of that institution. Had he done so, he would have discovered some of the misconceptions about the WTO that prompted his acquaintances to go to Seattle and would have enabled them to choose the target of their protests more wisely in the future. Instead, he propagates those misconceptions, which is an unhelpful ending to an otherwise excellent book.

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The Language of World Trade Politics: Unpacking the Terms of Trade
edited by Klaus Dingwerth and Clara Weinhardt
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A key message of this excellent contribution is that our understanding of world trade (politics) is not as straightforward as we would like it to be. By exploring the changing meaning of ten ‘terms of trade’ in separate chapters, the authors show how we, as

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18 Ibid.
practitioners and scholars, employ language and mental concepts that, while helping us make sense of trade politics, simultaneously shape and limit our appreciation of social reality. Overall, this edited volume ambitiously ‘maps the mind maps we use to make sense of world politics’ (xi) to provide insights into how thinking about trade has evolved and how it reflects particular sets of ideas, ideologies, and beliefs. Analysing core terms of the trade regime like protectionism, multilateralism, and development, the authors are specifically interested in the various ways in which political actors have used and contested the meaning of these concepts over time, and how new interpretations have shifted the boundaries of what is considered politically possible and legitimate in world trade.

The introductory chapter explains the theoretical foundations of this project and situates the contribution well within the growing constructivist literature in International Relations and International Political Economy. The book is presented as a contribution to the ‘concepts in world politics’ research (e.g. Berenskoetter, 2016), but also includes more fundamental considerations informed by sociological scholarship. For instance, the editors highlight the crucial link between language and power with reference to Bourdieu’s (1991) ‘symbolic power’ and draw on Boltanski’s (2011) pragmatic sociology to highlight the need for continuous justification in social interaction. The central concern of the book is that ‘[i]n the mainstream literature on world trade politics, language plays only a marginal role’ (8) and the authors rightly criticize the conventional focus on the material structures of the trade system. Yet, importantly, they do not want to replace material interests and power in the analysis of trade politics. Instead, they stress that ‘one important form of power lies in the ability to define the terms of trade’ (4, emphasis in original), which for them denotes the strategic use of these concepts to legitimize or suppress certain behaviour and policies within the trade regime.

The various definitional contests in the history of the multilateral trade regime, consequently, form the cross-cutting themes of the book, starting with the fundamental problem of what should be considered a ‘trade’ or, respectively, a ‘non-trade’ issue. As Robert Howse (2002: 96) once famously remarked, ‘[t]here is no natural or self-evident baseline or rule that can solve this basic dilemma’, generating a constant need to construct and adapt a shared understanding about what falls inside and outside of the trade regime. Similarly, the role of developing countries within the trade system features prominently, with various contributors tracing the discursive activities that led to the successive narrowing of policy space and the moderation of the demands of developing countries. As the last chapter summarizes, over recent decades ‘fair treatment was reinterpreted and the focus shifted to the need for ‘not being left worse off’ rather than special, i.e., preferential treatment’ (185). The protracted controversy about the democratic credentials of the WTO and, more generally, the inclusiveness of the trade regime also play a key role. Commendably, most contributions move beyond an analysis of state actors and explicitly incorporate various knowledge-based groups of experts, businesses, and civil society actors into their analysis of ‘meaning makers’ (14).

The relatively brief theoretical discussion is followed by ten chapters dissecting the meaning of individual concepts. The book’s coverage is ambitious and reveals the multidisciplinary background of the contributors. ‘Pragmatic reasons’ (4) determined
the selection of the terms of trade, with the authors choosing what they see as key terms of the world trade regime. These are, crucially, very different in nature. The chapters move from a discussion of the changing meaning of the concept of ‘trade’ itself to the fundamental idea of ‘protectionism’ and the institutional characteristics of the trade regime, primarily its ‘multilateral’ and ‘democratic’ nature. Along the way, two chapters shed light on the definition of ‘foreign direct investment’ as a statistical unit, not so much as a rhetorical device in the trade debate, and on the framing of ‘civil society’ as an actor in international trade politics. Finally, linkages and conflicts between trade and other mental frames are explored in chapters on ‘development’, ‘environment’, ‘coherence’, and ‘justice’.

Together, the contributions present compelling evidence on the various ways in which language and ideas shape (‘constitute’) our shared understanding of world trade politics. The wide-ranging analysis is thus well suited to support the book’s overall call to incorporate the ideational foundations more explicitly into the research agenda. Yet, and despite some extensive empirical work by the authors, a concern remains whether too much analytical depth was sacrificed for breadth. As the authors repeatedly acknowledge (e.g. 4, 66, 133, 187), to justify their approach, they need to clearly show what additional explanatory value can be derived from introducing language and ideas into the analysis. This can be both methodologically demanding and require the inclusion of lower levels of analysis that allow the researcher to trace variations in the concept’s meaning, usage, and ‘cognitive authority’ across time and different audiences. Dealing with what one contributor rightly identifies as ‘master terms of political and economic discourse’ (29), most of the ten to 15 page chapters thus necessarily take a relatively selective approach in explaining the concepts’ impact in trade politics or describe in broad terms the changes in meaning that a concept underwent, but not so much how and why this happened.

The analytical coverage of the analyses, however, is clearly remarkable, offering impressions from the political negotiations, professional and legal discourse, public debate, multilateral and bilateral/regional levels, and across various issue areas. For example, chapter 3 traces how export-oriented businesses advanced an expansive reading of protectionism during the Uruguay and Doha Rounds, leading to push back from civil society actors concerned about the weakening of domestic regulation. Chapter 6 discusses the WTO’s framing activities to reposition itself within the democratic deficit discourse, mainly by ‘accept[ing] the “democratic” label while amending the content for which the label stood’ (87). Chapter 7 offers a closer reading of civil society activities from the Seattle ministerial to recent mega-regional negotiations, describing attempts to control the narrative by non-traditional ‘meaning makers’ and illustrating how the terms we use to study and conduct trade governance are not neutral but, instead, socially constructed (111).

In comparison, the chapters on ‘coherence’ and ‘justice’ show how member state representatives intentionally talk past each other, using the same terms but implying different meanings. The OECD countries, for example, would use coherence narrowly as a ‘conservative rhetorical tool’ aimed at the stabilization of the prevailing discourse on trade, while developing countries would try to show how free trade can be counterproductive under certain circumstances like high external debt (128, similarly 177). The
chapters on ‘development’ and ‘justice’ further analyse the political debate between developing and developed countries based on a careful reading of the statements made by country representatives during the last three multilateral negotiation rounds. They show how the discourse on development in the WTO was closely linked to the prominence of different theories of economic development and how, consequently, the ‘language of neoliberalism present in the minds of negotiators’ resulted in a narrower interpretation of special and differential treatment provisions for developing countries (146).

With its focus on the rhetoric and mental frameworks that underpin the trade regime, this book is well timed to help us understand both the recent threats to the WTO system and the increase in protectionist tendencies across the globe. Parts of the academic and political discourse still need to come to terms with the way the public debate on trade has shifted over the last few years. Illustrating the power of dominant concepts, Cohen (2008: 153) stresses how ‘[t]oday the burden of proof is on those who would disrupt the liberal trading system, not those who would preserve it’. But this is perhaps less the case nowadays and the unusual criticism levelled at the WTO by traditional proponents has recently led WTO Director-General Azevêdo (2018) to declare that ‘it is vital that everyone who believes in the system raises their voice’.

The Language of World Trade Politics provides us with an innovative and broad perspective on the ideational structures underlying the trade regime and their effects on trade governance. The book can help us understand the recent rise of ‘protectionism in everything but name’ (45) and the US President declaring himself a ‘Tariff Man’, the diversity of ‘meaning makers’ in the struggle over shape and form of trade policy (98), and the unresolved debate on differentiation/graduation between developing countries that has contributed significantly to deadlock in the WTO. It also reminds us of the need to question statistical ‘facts’ (60) and romanticized narratives of trade multilateralism (77), and explains why developing countries continue to be frustrated by WTO rules on development despite the great attention the issue received in the Doha Round (133). The book’s only disappointment is the absence of a concluding chapter that unites the wide-ranging empirical analyses into a more general theoretical argument. The individual contributors rarely compare their findings, and cross-references remain few even though most accounts complement each other nicely. As such, it is mostly left to the reader to draw appropriate conclusions about the broader applicability of this fascinating research. In a way, this editorial choice seems fitting for a book that reveals the power of authoritative or taken-for-granted knowledge and, instead, stresses the multiple meanings and changing usage that lurk behind each concept.

References


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