“Don’t Blame the Weatherman”: How Nature Supplants Agency in Trade Discourse

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1) Introduction

In 2012, I participated in a debate on the proposition that EU decision-making in the field of the common currency should weigh Member States’ votes according to rating agencies’ ranking of their credit worthiness. One participant countered my democratic legitimacy concerns with the view that rating agencies were only doing their job. The speaker asserted: “you can’t blame the weatherman for bad weather” (and I assume that the speaker would not like to see weatherwomen, or any other type of weather messenger, blamed either). I found the metaphor stunning because it equated a human creation – the global financial system – with a natural phenomenon – the weather. As a result, my respondent posited the global financial system, including its inherent forces, as something that was natural and therefore in a very fundamental way inevitable. Global finance, the analogy tells us, is at best manageable through social re-action, but ultimately lies outside of human control, that is to say outside of the reach of human agency.

In the same year, I came across Carol Cohn’s (1987) piece “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defence Intellectuals” in which she analyses the language and rationality of US nuclear strategic planning. In one of the key passages, Cohn recalls how learning the expert discourse affected her interaction with US defence specialists. “What I found”, she writes, “was that no matter how well-informed my questions were, if I spoke English rather than expert jargon, the men responded as though I were ignorant, simple-minded, or both. It did not appear to occur to anyone that I might actually be choosing not to speak their language ... Using the right phrases opened my way into long, elaborate discussions that taught me a lot about technostrategic reasoning and how to manipulate it ... at the same time as the language gave me access to things I had been unable to speak about before, it radically excluded others. I could not use the language to express my concerns because it

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1 Rorden Wilkinson first directed my attention to Carol Cohn’s piece and I would like to thank him for encouraging me to write this paper. I would also like to thank Tim Rees for his helpful clarifications of geological concepts.
was physically impossible. This language does not allow certain questions to be asked or certain values to be expressed” (Cohn, 1987: 708).

The similarities with my own experience working in the field of global trade could not have been more striking. Quite like defence discourse, the language of trade expertise is, for example, littered with acronyms. This has led Richard Baldwin to joke in a lecture that I attended at the Graduate Institute in Geneva in July 2008 - as the Doha Development Round was historically collapsing in World Trade Organisation (WTO) headquarters next door - that trade was suffering from “TMA syndrome – Too Many Acronyms”. In 2007, before my article on anti-dumping procedures went to print with the *Chinese Journal of International Law*, the editor inquired in an email to me: “Could you please spell out your acronyms – this is like reading the Da Vinci Code.”

Several other observations that Cohn makes in the world of defence intellectuals are paralleled in the field of trade. In order to participate in debates, we must pack up arguments, concerns, truth claims, political demands and so forth in the technical language of expertise. Otherwise, we will at best not be heard, at worst not be taken seriously. I had another outstanding personal experience in this regard in 2012 during the review process of a particular piece. One reviewer was quick to diagnose that I did not have much detailed knowledge about the field of international trade and recommended that I should take a course in trade policy before substantially re-writing the piece. It is not my intention to attack the colleague in question, whose review was benevolent and clearly written with the intention to provide constructive feedback. I am evoking the anecdote to highlight an often neglected problem of trade policy, and of expert knowledge more generally.

At this point in my professional development, I held a Master of Law in WTO law, I had worked in two trade institutions – namely the WTO-UNCTAD co-agency International Trade Centre and DG Trade of the European Commission – I had acted as junior consultant on customs law for a consultancy company operating under the European Development Fund, I had four years experience
teaching trade law at the University of Helsinki, I had published three articles on trade politics and
trade law in peer-reviewed academic journals, I had spoken on trade issues at the WTO Public Forum
and I had become a member of the experts network of the International Centre for Trade and
Sustainable Development through several publications in *Trade Negotiations Insights* and *Passerelles
entre le Commerce et le Développement Durable* (Bridges between Trade and Sustainable
Development). The absence of jargon and the lack of orthodox trade rationality in my piece
nonetheless sufficed to make the truth self-evident that I was an amateur in the policy field.

I decided to take inspiration from Cohn and to systematically scan trade discourse, its content and its
usage, with the goal of contemplating the types of politics the expert language makes explicit and
the types of politics it hides. In Cohn’s words, I wanted to “give careful attention to the language we
choose to use – who it allows us to communicate with and what it allows us to think as well as say”
(Cohn, 1987: 690). For over a year, I went about my work in the various trade political contexts
where I ordinarily carry out my research with an ear tuned in on the language that trade experts,
including myself, employ and how we employ it. Over time, my conclusion about the driving imagery
underlying trade discourse, to my own surprise, reverted back to the above-cited weather
messenger.

The language of trade expertise has a tendency to depict trade political phenomena as natural
phenomena, that is to say to present them in terms that build on a Eurocentric vision of humanity’s
relationship with nature. In the Eurocentric mind frame, “a relationship of exteriority to ‘nature’ is
established” (Lander, 2002: 247). Under the conceptual division and opposition of culture and
nature, nature is not only a sphere that is exterior to our human life experience. It can also have
both beneficial and destructive effects on our lives. This perspective looms underneath trade
political terminology and rationality and creates what I call an “agency gap” in trade discourse. By
this I mean that trade discourse’s depictions of trade political phenomena regularly expose a lack of
an identifiable, acting subject in the situation that is being talked about, particularly in the language that relates to the system’s failures, shortcomings and imbalances.

In this paper I argue that the way in which global trade discourse evokes metaphors and analogies that mirror natural phenomena, firmly built on Eurocentric assumptions about our relationship with nature, supports and promotes certain types of agency in global trade politics while obscuring and obstructing others. As Cohn notes, this is not only a problem of language strictly speaking, because learning the expert language shapes the way in which we think about the field. As a result of references to Eurocentric notions of nature, the economy loses (some of) its character as a social sphere. Together with such references, the level of abstraction that is inherent in professional trade discourse creates a false sense of invariability and upholds a selective distribution of responsibility for trade political outcomes. Nature supplants agency in trade discourse. Negative outcomes can at best be mitigated, but never avoided, not least because the system’s operation is portrayed as partly depending on dynamics that lie outside of the realm of human agency. Ultimately, the supposedly neutral and objective language of international trade expertise, to use Erin Hannah’s phrase, “delineates the limits of the possible” (Hannah, 2011: 184) in trade politics in this way. The political effect is to condition what types of agency can “reap the benefits of trade”, to use another common trade idiom, and what types of agency struggle in this task.

2) Of Nature and Agency

Cohn explains: “individual intentions cannot necessarily be directly read from imagery, the imagery itself does not originate in ... particular individuals but in a broader cultural context” (Cohn, 1987: 693). While we might thus use trade discourse with the best intentions, the language helps to create and uphold a culture in which the economy is either depicted or treated as a set of natural forces, which the Eurocentric vision perceives as exterior to human agency. In doing so, the imagery prominently evoked in trade expertise cements the view that the underlying forces of global trade
cannot be avoided, nor altered in a meaningful way. This agency gap constrains politics, because under its lens the only possible course of action is re-action. It further has ethical implications, because identifying an acting agent is one precondition for according responsibility for the outcomes of our actions in human relations. In line with the Enlightenment vision of mastery of an essentially threatening nature, the terms build a scenario in which each are responsible for making their best possible arrangements to avoid hardship and to “reap the benefits” of a fundamentally hostile environment. Lamenting the hostility is futile, because you cannot “blame the weatherman” for bad weather. The depiction is deeply political, because it presents economic forces, including their inherent power relations, as fixed and immutable.²

As browsing the Dictionary of Trade Policy Terms reveals, a number of technical terms in trade discourse make analogies with or metaphorically evoke nature. Some of the terms are not specific to trade talk, although featuring prominently in negotiator jargon, such as “low-hanging fruit”, or “early harvest”. “Low-hanging fruit” refers to aspects of trade deals that should be easy for all parties to agree to, or problems that are easy to solve. The term contains the inherent expectation that such deals would bring benefits for all. “Early harvests” allow for the immediate application of a number of agreed rules before the overall deal has been closed. They are contrary to the WTO’s Single Undertaking principle derived from the Uruguay Round’s Punta del Este Declaration and anchored in the Doha Ministerial Declaration. According to another famous phrase, the Single Undertaking stipulates that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” and is generally perceived as allowing members to strike compromises across the large variety of issue areas that trade deals cover today.

Other technical terms are specific to trade and directly evoke our natural environment, such as “predatory pricing” or “preference erosion.” Akin to the merciless, yet effective behaviour of an animal of prey, economic agents that engage in “predatory pricing” set export prices at aggressively

² Trade discourse is therefore one foundational element of economism. For detailed analysis of the relationship between politics and economics under economism see Ashley, 1983, Teivainen, 2002 and Trommer, 2013.
low levels. Their assumed intention is to drive competitors out of the market. A WTO member can take action against such practice under the conditions outlined in Article VI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Anti-Dumping Agreement. The term is at the heart of anti-dumping law’s uneasy relationship with economic theory because, as the Dictionary of Trade Policy Terms highlights, “it has always been difficult to determine what the dividing line between competitive pricing and predatory pricing might be” (Goode, 2007: 339). “Preference erosion” denotes the effect of ongoing tariff elimination to factually minimise the commercial value of special benefits accorded to developing country members. It is typically listed as one difficulty that poor countries face in their efforts to “trade out of poverty”.

What is astonishing about these metaphors is that they either obscure human agency or are effectively void of it. There is no concrete, acting human agent behind trade political phenomena. Quite like the weatherman metaphor cited in the Introduction, trade discourse limits our assessment of what aspects of the economy can be controlled through human agency in this way. As a result, the discourse implicitly confirms and thus perpetuates some of the underlying assumptions in neoclassical trade theory, although they have been subject to fierce theoretical debate since the origin of political economy as a discipline in the eighteenth century (for a review of the historical trajectory of trade theory see Trommer, 2013).

The term “low-hanging fruit” is a case in point. In January 2013, WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy told journalists at the Confederation of Indian Industry Global Partnership Summit that “given the difficulty in concluding the Doha Round in the short term, the members should agree on reaping ‘low-hanging fruits’” (Srivastava, 2013). When trade experts recommend that trade negotiators should pick low-hanging fruit, the metaphor draws our attention to the action itself, namely the fact that easy deals of assumed beneficial outcome can be struck. The broader political and socio-economic context of those who are picking the fruit is entirely excluded from the picture. In consequence, the idiom casts aside two of the most long-standing political and theoretical
controversies, namely: how are low-hanging fruit divided among states, once they have been picked.
And: where do the fruit go within states?

The question of the distribution of the gains from trade nonetheless remains one of the biggest unresolved puzzles in political economy and economic theory. At the same time, it is increasingly clear that globalisation processes have resulted in the creation of a post-national global economic sphere in which corporations without particular territorial ties shape global regulatory structures independently of or even in contradiction with national public policy prerogatives. While the assumption that the gains from trade go to those national economies whose government officials are doing the picking continues to inform trade negotiators, there is growing evidence from the world economy that corporate actors do not share the sense of allegiance required to make the prophecy self-fulfilling. Although talk of “low-hanging fruit” discards the very possibility that the distribution of the gains from trade should be discussed in global trade politics, the friction between theory and practice continues to fuel political and social controversy about corporate-driven trade governance today.

The same analysis can be made for the term “early harvest.” The metaphor marginalises questions of who is harvesting what early, and what will happen with the crop. At the same time, the term’s inherent dynamic reflects the Eurocentric view of a human exteriority to and struggle against nature and its potentially destructive forces. We think of early harvesting as beneficial, because natural forces can potentially threaten our precious labour at any point in time. Draught, wind, hail or thunder suffice to destroy even low-hanging fruit. This is the perspective of humanity wrestling with nature in order to extract the means of its subsistence, rather than humanity residing in a harmonious relationship with the earth.

The political repercussions of the analogy could well be lost when considered outside of the historical and procedural context of multilateral trade negotiations. As mentioned above, the Single
Undertaking has been one key principle of trade negotiations since the Uruguay Round. This is an important aspect for developing countries in particular, who have had to operate with international trade rules that are tilted against their interests since the early days of the GATT. Rorden Wilkinson argues that the WTO procedural and institutional framework locks in existing power asymmetries of the global trading order and reproduces global injustice due to its logic of exchange of trade concessions through connected trade rounds. This results in a mechanism that forces developing country members to make new unfavourable concessions to industrialised members in order to remedy previous negotiating outcomes (Wilkinson, 2009a).

Under the inbuilt tit-for-tat logic, an early harvest is a questionable move, because it can mean handing over “negotiating chips”, another common term in trade talks, to the negotiating partner. The early harvest metaphor is of such instinctive positive quality to the Eurocentric mindset that its use puts those who want to cling to the pre-agreed rule of the Doha Round negotiations, namely that nothing will be agreed until everything will be agreed, into a position where they need to justify this preference. If we consider multilateral trade negotiations from the vantage point of deliberative democracy, the expression and its political implications alter the prior consensus that the participants to the speech situation made about its discursive and deliberative practices. From the perspective of discourse ethics, the early harvest metaphor makes genuine consensus in the Doha Round impossible (see Habermas, 1996).

In other words, the way in which technical terminology in the field of trade reproduces Eurocentric views on the relationship between people and nature, and notably the inherent absence of agency, has the astonishing effect in the real world of supporting the types of agency that have been dominant in the global trading system from the outset. The agency gap that metaphorical reference to the forces of nature produces benefits certain types of political agency in the real world of trade negotiations and creates legitimacy biases against others.
In addition, the agency gap in trade discourse helps to diffuse responsibility for the negative consequences of trade reform. The obvious term that exposes this tendency is “preference erosion”. In geology, erosion is the transportation of sediment, whereby the application of a force, notably water or wind, over time breaks down a block of material and moves it to a different location. Other than through natural forces, this can also occur when one block of material is moved across another. Erosion is a natural phenomenon. Any human attempt to eliminate erosion from the spectrum of natural phenomena would be laughable. Instead, our actions need to take the invariable process of erosion into account in the way in which we plan, organise and live our lives. The analogy of preference erosion projects this attitude into trade discourse. We can lament or regret that preference erosion is occurring. We can mitigate its effects or at best use them to our benefit. However, human agency plays no role in erosion as such.

As a result of the lack of agency, the analogy portrays an image whereby it is not the fault of anybody in particular that the special preferences for poor countries diminish over time as trade liberalisation proceeds. Since erosion is simply a natural phenomenon, attempts of holding anybody responsible for stopping preference erosion would be absurd, expectations that anyone would be responsible for repairing the damage would be ludicrous. The analogy implies that it is the responsibility of the poor countries to remove themselves from the situation where they are vulnerable to preference erosion. Where the international community is ready to help, this consequently appears as a noble and altruistic gesture.

The problematic aspect of the analogy arises because the view tinkers with the standard narrative of the global trading system by supplanting certain aspects of its institutional and political history. The overwhelming majority of the WTO literature and even of the literature on developing country members starts with a vague reference to considerable increases in GATT membership numbers following decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s and notes the relative inertia of the newly
independent countries in the system’s political organs until the Uruguay Round. This account is, at the very best, historically incomplete.

When the twenty-three original signatories adopted the GATT in 1947, they did so also for the dependent territories that were under their political control at the time, thus factually drawing virtually all of Africa and South-East Asia into the realm of the multilateral system. Following their independence, many former colonies continued to apply the GATT de facto which meant observing the rights and obligations that had previously been negotiated for them under the colonial regime (for a detailed analysis see Trommer, 2013). Effectively, the rise in membership numbers that the literature finds did not significantly increase the geographical reach of the GATT. The old new members by and large also refrained from renegotiation the colonial arrangement under which they had entered the organisation.

The GATT recognised as early as 1958 that the system put in place ten years previously did not provide benefits for developing countries (GATT, 1958). The principle of non-reciprocity, originating in the Kennedy Round in the 1960s and adopted with Part IV of the GATT, and the Enabling Clause and Special and Differential Treatment, originating in the Tokyo Round in the 1970s, were construed as part of the set of tools to remedy the situation. The fact that these reforms present an opt-out from the system’s rules, rather than adjusting the original imbalances (DiCaprio and Trommer, 2010), continues to haunt the organisation as evidenced in the Doha Round deadlock. The term “preference erosion” works to eliminate these historical interconnections from our trade political ontology. It means that the expert language distorts some of the key political conflicts about the multilateral trading system that feed on its specific historical path.

The terminology that is specific to developing country members in the global trading system reproduces and exacerbates these problems. Teivo Teivainen observes a tendency in world politics to depict developing countries as child-like and argues that this gives the developed world the social
function of a teacher who guides development processes (Teivainen, 2009). Trade discourse’s technically correct term for the (mostly hypothetical) endpoint of the development process, namely “graduation”, supports Teivainen’s argument. In addition, the dual lens of an ethic of justice and an ethic of care first outlined in Carol Gilligan’s (1982) piece *In a Different Voice* makes visible the multilateral trading system’s two broad normative orders that are built on alternative conceptualisations of justice.

Gilligan identifies two ways of speaking about justice that are built on diverging conceptualisations of morality. The ethic of justice “ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules” and is informed by “the conception of morality as fairness”. In what she calls the ethic of care, on the other hand, “the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (Gilligan, 1982: 19). The basic principle underlying the WTO’s legal and political order is that of non-discrimination. Many of the legal rules of the organisation are an expression of a basic promise of fairness that is based on values of procedural formalism and access to equal opportunities, perhaps most clearly formulated in the often sought, seldom identified “level playing field”.

The terminology reserved for developing country members, on the other hand, is dripping with language that evokes images of contextualised care-giving and supportive child-rearing. “Taking into account their level of development”, the “strong” WTO members are supposed to “enable” the “vulnerable” and the “weak” through “special and differential treatment” to fully participate in an assumed equal and fair system. There are several interconnected problems here. The WTO’s special and differential ethic of care provides an opt-out from the non-discriminatory realm of its ethic of justice. The discourse thus works to the effect of removing these members from the WTO’s ordinary realm of justice that, as consequence, does not seem to be in need of rectification. The imbalances within the system of non-discriminatory justice remain untouched.
In addition, the WTO is founded on a rhetorical allegiance to “trade liberalisation”, while the principle of non-reciprocity historically emerged in response to assertions that so-called “protectionism” had a role to play in development policy as part of aspirations for the New International Economic Order. The language pertaining to poor countries in the WTO not only removes poor countries and their trade concerns from the underlying normative order of abstract, procedural fairness and belittles them through language evoking childhood. It also bans persisting theoretical doubts as to the ability of trade liberalisation to increase global welfare for all from the realm of the non-discriminatory ethic of justice. In other words, trade discourse removes two basic political conflicts from the realm of trade governance, namely the issue of the appropriate distribution of rights and obligations among members and the issue of the appropriateness of so-called “trade liberalisation” as a trade policy choice. The language prevents us from raising these problems, because we cannot formulate them in ways that pass as valid knowledge in trade expertise.

In sum, trade discourse makes recourse to imagery of our living with and in a nature that is perceived in opposition to humanity. This provides the foundations of a language that casts aside the political problems that have emerged from the global trading system's particular historical evolution. We consequently face an important political dilemma. Trade discourse is, on the one hand, the dominant vernacular through which trade political claims must be expressed in order to be heard. On the other hand, its dominant metaphorical abstractions make it impossible to formulate a number of grievances that parts of the membership today insist must be addressed. Under these conditions, the persistent nature of the Doha deadlock comes as no surprise.

3) Of Abstraction and the Limits of the Possible

Through several levels of abstraction, trade discourse delineates the limits of the possible in trade politics, that is to say impacts on who can speak, what can be said and to what extent the dominant
view can be challenged. As Cohn notes, language not only shapes how we think about a policy field, but also structures power relations in more concrete ways by giving affirmative, fixed answers to the questions of what trade politics might be about and how far human agency could temper with the status quo. At the technical level, the language performs a gate-keeping function as to who can communicate and limits the circle of potential speakers in trade politics in this way. In terms of substance, the abstract language posits the speaker in a distinct perspective, namely that of the good or service circulating around the global economy, and excludes a variety of alternative perspectives, notably that of the people “behind” the traded goods and services. As a result, trade discourse is not only a closed and self-sufficient language that can perfectly well be spoken without reference to any real life situation, but it also limits the range of issues that can be talked about. Finally, these limits of the possible are reified through selective abstraction from the forces of nature and through reference to the supernatural and the mystical, that is to those forces that lie beyond science or the laws of nature and that transcend human understanding. From the perspective of trade discourse global trade is, as it were, larger than life.

One distinct feature of trade discourse is the abundance and dominance of acronyms. Cohn writes about acronyms in defence strategy: “they restrict communications to the initiated, leaving all others both uncomprehending and voiceless in the debate” (Cohn, 1987: 703). This is the case in trade politics also. In the field of trade, several layers of essential knowledge are wrapped up in acronyms. First, the treaty structure of the WTO is relatively complex, consisting of the WTO Agreement and a number of annexed agreements that provide the operational rules for the multilateral system. The vast majority of these international treaties are usually expressed in acronyms. Next to the better-known GATT, GATS,\(^3\) TRIPS,\(^4\) and TRIMS,\(^5\) we find the text on RoOs,\(^6\)

\(^3\) General Agreement on Trade in Services
\(^4\) Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
\(^5\) Trade-Related Aspects of Investment Measures
the SCM, SPS and TBT Agreements and the DSU, among others. The same applies for the steadily growing network of bilateral agreements, which are often interchangeably referred to as FTAs, RTAs and PTAs, although debates on which acronym is appropriate are ongoing. Individual FTAs are equally expressed in acronyms, which are at times distinguishable by one or two letters only. Such is the case for the TPP and the TTIP, SACU and SADC, or NAFTA, CAFTA and EFTA. In addition to the legal texts, several types of principles, rules and negotiating areas are expressed in acronyms, such as for example MFN, SDT, GSP, NTBs or NAMA. Finally, entire WTO negotiating groups hide behind certain acronyms, which are regularly supplemented with numbers.

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6 Rules of Origin
7 Subsidies and Countervailing Measures
8 Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures
9 Technical Barriers to Trade
10 Dispute Settlement Understanding
11 Free Trade Agreement
12 Regional Trade Agreement
13 Preferential Trade Agreement
14 Trans-Pacific Partnership
15 Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
16 South African Customs Union
17 South African Development Community
18 North American Free Trade Agreement
19 Central America Free Trade Agreement
20 European Free Trade Association
21 Most Favoured Nation
22 Special and Differential Treatment
23 Generalised System of Preferences
24 Non-Tariff Barriers
25 Non-Agricultural Market Access
that may have correlated with the number of countries in the group at one point in time, but should not be taken at face value. We can think of the G20, the G33, the G90, but also the NAMA or the Cotton. Alternatively, groups are captured under special expressions the meaning of which cannot be discerned from the phrase, but must be learnt. Examples include the Cairns group or the Quad.

Elaborate use of these terms and flawless incorporation into statements is an essential condition for being taken seriously within the field of international trade. The ability to crack (or laugh at) jokes that play with the meaning of these acronyms will distinguish the accomplished trade expert from the outsider. Thus, it has been noted that the EU’s EBA scheme should really be called “Everything

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26 WTO members: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Uruguay, Venezuela, Zimbabwe (WTO, 2013b).

27 WTO members: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Benin, Bolivia, Botswana, Côte d’Ivoire, China, Congo, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Korea, Republic of, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mongolia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Tanzania, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela, Zambia, Zimbabwe (WTO, 2013b).


29 WTO members: Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Namibia, Philippines, South Africa, Tunisia, Venezuela (WTO, 2013b).

30 WTO members: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali (WTO, 2013b).

31 WTO members: Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Uruguay (WTO, 2013b).

32 Canada, EU, Japan, USA.
But Farms”. Today less popular in WTO circles is the pun that UNCTAD stands for “Under No Circumstances Take a Decision”.

In addition, each specific sub-field has its own terminology that has authoritatively defined content, as a result of judicial interpretation through the Dispute Settlement Body. Although the expressions might contain fairly standard terms in the English language, their specific trade political meaning cannot be discerned from the words themselves but must be learnt and internalised. Examples include “commercial presence”, “parallel import”, “causality”, “risk assessment”, “amber box”, “retaliation” and so forth.

33 EBA stands for Everything But Arms and is the EU’s preferential scheme for the group of least developed countries. It provides duty free quota free access to the EU market in all sectors except arms and armament, but initially excluded bananas, sugar and rice for a phase in period of 5 to 8 years.

34 UNCTAD is the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and was set up in 1964, that is to say in the same year as Part IV of the GATT was adopted. This was part of the broader reactions to the GATT’s above-cited 1958 acknowledgement that the global trading system was tilted against developing countries’ interests.

35 “Any type of business or professional establishment within the territory of a member of the GATS for the purpose of supplying a service” (Goode, 2007: 83).

36 “The import outside of the manufacturer’s or distributor’s authorised channel of a product with an intellectual property content from another country where the product has been lawfully placed under on the market by the owner of the intellectual property right, or with the owner’s consent” (Goode, 2007: 327).

37 “The existence of a causal link between increased imports and serious injury or the threat of serious injury to domestic injury producing like or directly competitive products which can be used to impose safeguards” (Goode, 2007: 73).

38 “Members of the WTO may apply food safety, animal health and plant health regulations to their international trade, but they must not use them to discriminate arbitrarily or unjustifiably between members in similar conditions. The WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures sets out rules for achieving this. It encourages members to harmonize measures and to base them on international standards, guidelines and recommendations where these are available. If members wish to maintain higher standards, they must carry out risk assessments. A risk assessment can be an evaluation of the likelihood of the introduction or spread of a pest or disease in the light of the sanitary and phytosanitary measures applied. It can also be an evaluation of the potential for adverse effects on human or animal health arising from the presence of additives, contaminants, toxins or disease-causing organisms in food, beverages or feedstuffs. Risk assessment must take into account available scientific evidence, relevant processes and production methods, relevant inspection, sampling and testing methods, prevalence of specific diseases or pests, existence of pest- or disease-free areas, relevant ecological and environmental conditions, and quarantine or other treatment. An assessment of the economic factors involved is also required with the objective of minimizing negative trade effects if measures are taken” (Goode, 2007: 367).

39 “Supports for agriculture considered to distort trade and therefore subject to reduction commitments” (Goode, 2007: 22).

40 “Action taken by a country to restrain imports from a country that has increased a tariff or imposed other measures adversely affecting its exports” (Goode, 2007: 364).
As Cohn points out, learning the acronyms and the language more generally comes with the “thrill of being able to manipulate an arcane language, the power of entering the secret kingdom, being someone in the know” (Cohn, 1987: 704). It is a rewarding experience on several levels. As in the case of nuclear defence strategy, in trade politics “few know and those who do are powerful” (Cohn, 1987: 704). Learning global trade discourse enables us to converse with and imagine we could be part of a group that is often perceived as a global elite. Related to this is the fact that “when you speak it, you feel in control” (Cohn, 1987: 704). Learning trade discourse thus comes with a sense of acquiring the basic tools for managing the otherwise hazardous forces of international trade, that is to say the tools that are perceived as enabling us to “reap benefits” from the global trading system. For this reason, while the first encounter with global trade discourse is often frustrating, learning the language and acquiring the ability to master it comes with a sense of empowerment and, is, in one word, fun.

Similar to Cohn’s experience, the process is banal and transformational at the same time. “It is simply learning a new language, but by the time you are through, the content of what you can talk about is monumentally different, as is the perspective from which you speak” (Cohn, 1987: 705). Accepting trade discourse’s depiction of the social relations that trading generates as natural forces is a prerequisite for the ability to speak the language. According to Cohn, “the language shapes your categories of thought ... and defines the boundaries of imagination” (Cohn, 1987: 714) in this way, which results in the abstraction from real life situations that is typical for professional discourse. This is the case partly because the learner must adopt the particular perspective on the global trading system that underlies trade discourse and by doing so, must drop all other perspectives. The only acceptable vantage point under trade expertise is that of the good or the service travelling around global market places. Trade experts determine what the goods and services are and where they are from, we assess which can go from one particular country to another particular country under which conditions, we count their value and how their travels increase or decrease in frequency, destination
and length from year to year, we advise policy makers on how to facilitate the journey of this, that or the other item that are deemed crucial to their economies. As goods and services become the subjects of trade discourse, the people that are producing, exchanging and using them become pushed to the margins of the spectrum.

This can be observed very clearly when teaching international trade law. Once the language is acquired, students can become so immersed in sophisticated deliberations on, say, how the principle of freedom of transit in Article V of the GATT relates to the general obligations of enforcement of intellectual property rights in Article 41 of the TRIPS Agreement, that they are often genuinely surprised to discover that what is at stake in the case is the ability of a government to run a public health programme intended to save the very real lives of its very real citizens. We may excuse the students (and the trade experts?) for failing to remember this, because the subjects of global trade talk are not people, but products and services. As such, trade discourse decouples the things that are being traded from the people that are doing the exchange, and, in another political move that affirms disputed assumptions of neoclassical trade theory, disconnects social, political and economic contexts from the realm of trade policy.

Although we know that interconnections between trade and labour rights, environmental protection, public health and so forth exist in the real world, trade discourse cannot adopt a holistic perspective. This is one aspect of the way in which our thinking about trade dodges the social dimensions of the trading activity to the benefit of an exclusive focus on its economic dimensions striving for a welfare that is defined as access to goods and services and ability to consume (see Trommer, 2013). Trade discourse is a self-contained, abstract language in which “there is no need to think about the concrete human realities behind the model” (Cohn, 1987: 710). The political implication is that we can call for new approaches to tackle, for example, the interface between trade and climate change, but as long as standard trade discourse stays the only language in town, we will struggle to address the human realities behind the model in concrete trade politics. Worse, the view that the
accumulation of wealth requires that a human and environmental price be paid starts appearing as undisputed necessity. Pathways for thinking about alternative ways of trading into sustainable futures are effectively blocked.

The limits of the possible thus delineated are upheld through metaphorical references relating to nature that are often based on selective abstraction from the real world. Wilkinson has written about the bicycle metaphor in trade policy-making that is probably the single most common metaphor global trade talk has to offer. He explains: “at its simplest, the bicycle metaphor suggests that trade liberalisation, like the forward motion required to keep a bicycle moving, needs to be in a state of perpetual motion. If that motion were to cease, the process (like the bicycle) would collapse and cause injury to the global economy/the bicycle’s rider. This metaphor ... has created an imperative around the perpetuation of a particular kind of trade liberalisation – one that primarily benefits the core interests underpinning the trade regime while at the same time only offering limited prospects for those on the periphery – that has resulted in the conclusion of successive trade bargains that have been deeply asymmetrical” (Wilkinson, 2009b: 604-5).

The metaphor speaks to us because most of us would at some point in our lives have learnt that unless we pedal and thus produce the speed that helps us to balance on two narrow wheels, the forces of gravity are such that we will fall. However, as a South African trade official pointed out in a personal conversation in May 2013, any cyclist will immediately tell you that if you tried to pedal continuously without ever taking a break, you will also crash, this time from your own exhaustion. In the same vein, the metaphor is never evoked to point out that a bike occasionally needs maintenance to continue to run smoothly. None of these aspects suit the dominant narrative of trade discourse, which focuses on the natural forces component that makes the bicycle metaphor a compelling and pressing argument for advancing the core interests underpinning the trade regime. The way in which nature supplants agency in trade discourse works to confirm the status quo in global trade politics and undermines any type of agency that strives for transformation.
This is also evident in allusions to the supernatural, the mystical or the magical, all of which equally reside outside of the reach of human agency. The trade economists Richard Baldwin and Frédéric Robert-Nicoud for example detect “the juggernaut effect of trade liberalisation” (Baldwin and Robert-Nicoud, 2008). “Juggernaut” is a metaphorical reference to a Hindu temple car and in colloquial English language refers to an unstoppable and often merciless force of mystical origin. The term arises from European observations of Hindu practices in the nineteenth century, rather than from Hindu accounts of their religious practices, thus fitting my general argument about the Eurocentric foundations of trade discourse.

According to Baldwin and Robert-Nicoud’s juggernaut model, the reciprocal aspect of trade liberalisation at the WTO turns exporting interests into free traders, which affects the political economy at home in favour of free trade. The policy adjustments that governments subsequently make shift the economy further towards free trade interests, because these interests benefit the most from the reforms. As a result, they demand more trade liberalisation, which will help them to expand their economic position, which means that they ask for more trade liberalisation, which will strengthen their economic position further, and so on. Like the juggernaut, trade liberalisation has gained an internal momentum that makes it unstoppable, regardless of what the effects on any aspect of society other than exporting interests might be.

This type of self-perpetuating trade political force can be identified in other terms that are common coin in trade discourse. Critical mass agreements, for example, are expected to create a “centre of gravity” that pulls other countries into joining a given deal. While the advocates of such agreements are often happy to confirm in personal conversation that they have the very human phenomenon of peer pressure in mind, the professional, discursive reference evokes natural, invariable forces and the laws of physics. In economic theory more broadly, the term “market forces”, the so-called “laws” of supply and demand or the economy’s alleged tendency to strive towards “equilibrium” are further examples that reflect the influence of Newtonian physics on the evolution of the social sciences (for
a detailed account see Cohen, 1994). Although in all of these examples, there is human agency at play in the real world – someone is demanding a deal, someone is negotiating concessions, someone is applying trade rules, someone benefits, someone is hard done-by – this is depoliticised through metaphors that at least partly diverge responsibility for policy outcomes to the forces of juggernauts, equilibriums and gravities, none of which are thought to be subject to human agency.

In sum, through the use of underlying images that refer to a Eurocentric notion of the relationship between humanity and nature and to ideas about natural and supernatural forces, the character of the economy as a social sphere and the nature of the trading activity as a social activity is downplayed. As a result, the role of human agency in causing outcomes is obscured. The idea that some trade political outcomes are unavoidable, because they are quite simply beyond human control, is naturalised. Abstraction further creates indifference and fatalism in view of the negative effects of trade liberalisation.

Central to this mind frame is the agency gap in trade discourse. If the forces of trade are like the forces of nature and thus cannot be significantly altered by human agency, then we can only try to protect ourselves from its negative effects, use the positive effects to our advantage and possibly provide relief for the victims. However, we can never fully prevent disasters from occurring. Cohn describes the concrete consequences of the absence of people as a point of reference in the language of US nuclear strategic planning with words that fit the world of trade expertise with frightening accuracy: “if human lives are not the reference point, then it is not only impossible to talk about humans in this language, it also becomes in some sense illegitimate to ask the paradigm to reflect human concerns. Hence, questions that break through the numbing language ... and raise issues in human terms can be dismissed easily. No one will claim that the questions are unimportant, but they are inexpert, unprofessional, irrelevant to the business at hand to ask. The discourse among the experts remains hermetically sealed. The problem, then, is not only that the language is narrow but also that it is seen by its speakers as complete or whole unto itself − as representing a body of
truths that exist independently of any other truth or knowledge. The isolation of technical knowledge from social or psychological or moral thought, or feeling, is all seen as legitimate and necessary ... it is not that the men I spoke with would say that these are invalid questions. They would, however, simply say that they are separate questions, questions that are outside what they do, outside their realm of expertise” (Cohn, 1987: 711-2).

4) Conclusion

In this paper, I have deconstructed trade discourse to show how underlying imagery built on a Eurocentric vision of nature and our relationship with it works to obscure the role of human agency in global trade relations. My findings on the implications of this language for the politics of trade mirror not only what Cohn found almost thirty years ago in the field of security studies. They also fit into more recent scholarship that scrutinises how the way we speak and think about the economy conditions the world economic order we imagine possible. Doreen Massey (2013) argues “the whole vocabulary we use to talk about the economy, while presented as a description of the natural and the eternal, is in fact a political construction that needs contesting” (Massey, 2013: 6-7).

Global trade politics is far from veering in this direction. WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy has recently convened a panel of trade insiders whose task it was to reflect on the future of global trade. Confirming the analysis that I provided in this paper, the panel professes: “whether in richer or poorer countries, the benefits from trade entail pain as well as gain. That is how trade works” (WTO, 2013a: 12). We learn that “blaming trade for that for which it is not responsible, or looking to trade policy to provide fixes much better provided through other policies would only undermine confidence in and commitment to trade” (WTO, 2013a: 15). Because the forces of global trade are larger than life and, it is suggested, factually constitute a natural environment that is both benevolent and hostile at the same time, “governments have a responsibility to find ways of better
distributing the gains and mitigating the pain if trade is not to become the source of social tension, jeopardizing the overall gains to the economy” (WTO, 2013a: 12).

While this reasoning gives continuity to dominant trade discourse and rationality, the panel report also introduces new language, the meaning of which is obscure. In relation to the steadily growing web of preferential trade agreements, the panel recommends “an exploration of ways in which preferential trade agreements and the principles underlying them could increasingly converge with the multilateral system” (WTO, 2013a: 3). As far as imbalances in the system are concerned, “the panel recommends a new approach to managing reciprocity and flexibility which fully respects the different realities and needs of members at different levels of development, but embraces a more granulated and dynamic process leading progressively to convergence” (WTO, 2013a: 4).

Convergence is a key concept in the panel’s vision of the future of global trade, as the title of the report *The Future of Trade: The Challenges of Convergence* indicates.

The *Dictionary of Trade Policy Terms* has no entry on the term convergence, nor does the WTO’s glossary on its website. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, convergence refers to “the process or state of converging” which means “tend to meet at a point” or “approximate in the sum of its terms towards a definite line”. In other words, what convergence in global trade governance might be is anyone’s guess. The agency gap in trade discourse that I have identified throughout the paper is of extraordinary dimensions in the panel’s statements. There is not one single acting human agent in the panel’s recommendations. Global trade exists and functions independently from any society at all. It is, like the mathematical concept of convergence, universal and eternal. Within this dehumanised, infinite sphere, we find one pocket of contextualised rationality and care in the “new approach” that takes into consideration “different realities and needs of members at different levels of development”. These countries currently reside outside of the system’s universal and, as the panel has previously told us, immutable logic, but are expected to be able to reach this realm
through a “granulated and dynamic process leading progressively to convergence”. Needless to say the notion of a “granulated” process in trade governance is equally novel and cryptic.

Massey nonetheless provides room for optimism when she explains: “the language we use has effects in moulding identities and characterising social relationships ... Discourse matters. Moreover it changes, and it can – through political work – be changed” (Massey, 2013: 3). This brings my paper back to its starting point. In order to assure that the trading activity and trade scholarship can make a positive contribution to more sustainable futures, all of us working in the field must “give careful attention to the language we choose to use – who it allows us to communicate with and what it allows us to think as well as say” (Cohn, 1987: 690).

6) References


