

GLOBAL INSTITUTIONS



**Expert Knowledge in
Global Trade**

**Edited by Erin Hannah, James Scott
and Silke Trommer**



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Fresh, original, engaging – this new contribution to the literature on trade governance is genuinely welcome and exciting. The chapters are of the highest quality, written by impressively experienced and knowledgeable authors who really know their stuff. This book will fully deserve the wide attention it will inevitably command.

Nicola Phillips, *Professor of Political Economy,
University of Sheffield, UK*

Expert Knowledge in Global Trade brings together a first-rate group of scholars whose analysis provides valuable insights into the ways in which the ideas of ‘experts’ serve powerful interests and shape outcomes in the global trade regime.

Jennifer Clapp, *University of Waterloo, Canada*

These thought-provoking and diverse essays expose the explicit and subtle ways in which experts have shaped international trade policies to legitimize prevailing orthodoxies and, lately, to challenge them. This excellent volume is a significant contribution to scholarship on the role of ideas, from the commonsensical to the highly technical, in global political economy.

JP Singh, *George Mason University, USA*

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Expert Knowledge in Global Trade

This book explores tensions in global trade by examining the role of experts in generating, disseminating, and legitimating knowledge about the possibilities of trade to work for global development. To this end, contributors assess authoritative claims on knowledge. They also consider structural features that uphold trade experts' monopoly over knowledge, such as expert language and legal and economic expertise. The chapters collectively explore the tensions between actors who seek to effect change and those who work to uphold the status quo, exacerbate asymmetries, and reinforce the dominant narrative of the global trade regime.

The book addresses the following key overarching research questions:

- Who is considered to be a trade expert and how does one become a knowledge producer in global trade?
- How do experts acquire, disseminate, and legitimate knowledge?
- What agendas are advanced by expert knowledge?
- How does the discourse generated within trade expertise serve to close off alternative institutional pathways and modes of thinking?
- What potential exists for the emergence of more emancipatory global trade policies from contemporary developments in the field of trade expertise?

This book will be of great interest to students and scholars of international political economy, trade politics, international relations, and international organizations.

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Global Institutions

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**Edited by
Erin Hannah, James Scott and Silke
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7 Symbolic power and social critique in the making of Oxfam's trade policy research

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This chapter investigates the making of expert knowledge in relation to international trade policy and how such processes are intertwined with forms of power. Similar to other spheres of capitalism, our understanding of the power-knowledge nexus can help to inform questions of participation, agenda setting, and material outcomes within formal trade politics. A focus on such links can also shed light on how professional experts within this field often struggle over the sources and techniques of legitimation. In keeping with the aims of this book, to explore how authoritative claims on trade knowledge shape the topography of the (im)possible, the argument here probes the recent history of a particular organization: Oxfam International.

As one of the most recognizable voices in civil society, Oxfam offers an interesting illustration for how a critique of capitalism, rooted in a sense of social justice, can register a place in debates on trade policy. Within the space constraints here, the argument explores how Oxfam analysts carved out this position and, in particular, unpicks some of the core strategies and styles of such labor. In doing so, this chapter complements and enriches existing literature, not only in respect to the analysis of civil society groups in trade politics but, more broadly, our understanding of how alternative heterodox opinions can contest orthodox forms of knowledge.

To prosecute this enquiry, the chapter deploys a conceptual framework informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu—specifically, his notion of symbolic power. By adopting this sociological optic, the argument aims to offer fresh insights into the social construction of linguistic

authority within the policy *milieu* of trade politics. In particular, a Bourdieusian perspective targets the ways in which forms of power acquire recognition and, in doing so, can enlighten our understanding of the possibilities for agency within constrained social spaces.

The chapter is thus organized into three main sections. First, in an initial contextual discussion, the chapter situates the problem area in relation to the complex legacy of social critique within transnational trade policymaking. Second, the conceptual toolkit on symbolic power is outlined and unpacked, including broader empirical illustrations drawn from trade issues. In the third section, the framework on symbolic power is applied to explain the specific case of Oxfam's rise in trade policy debates. The chapter ends with some concluding remarks, including notable caveats to the larger argument and pathways for considering further research.

Social critique and trade politics

Since the first currents of socialism and the work of Marx, social critique has posed recurring problems for how capitalism is justified and practiced. Although such efforts are often limited, disorganized, or beset by setbacks and blockages in relation to larger "orthodoxies," this does not mean that the critique remains unworthy of analytical attention. On the contrary, as argued by Boltanski and Chiapello, critique can be conceived as a major (although by no means the only) "motor of change" in the evolution of the system.¹ Not only does social critique confront capitalism with troubling ethical questions, most prominently around themes of economic inequality and human exploitation, but also, through a period of reflection, experimentation, and potential incorporation, critique may inadvertently "give" new ideological resources to reinvigorate capitalism (or rather, capitalism "captures" and claims new ideas for itself). This means that the precise contribution of any critique often remains unclear and potentially incoherent, particularly in terms of how it inspires agents and the extent to which it may have any concrete impact. In other words, certain forms of critique often play an anxious dance between, on the one hand, a desire to be recognized by power and, on the other, a need to create a heterodoxy that can substantially challenge the orthodoxy.

The social space of policymaking on international trade presents an interesting object for dissecting this wider relationship between critique and capitalism. In broad terms, the period since the mid-1990s has seen the emergence of alternative voices who have unsettled, contested, or strongly rebuked how the political economy of trade has been both

conceptualized and materially prosecuted. One can argue that the strengthening of an “augmented Washington Consensus”²—a vision that still contains the core “Victorian virtue” of “free markets and sound money,”³ but now appeals to “second generation reforms” around matters of governance, institutions, and poverty reduction⁴—was a reaction to how neoliberalism had become a “damaged brand.” Within such debates, the inequities that marked the transnational regulation of trade—with the distinctions between richer and poorer countries being one major axis—generated some of the most heated claims and counterclaims.⁵ It needs to be underscored that this “force of critique”⁶ took many forms and involved multiple agents, including initial efforts by developing country governments to contest World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) reforms; austerity-related street protests and riots in different African and Latin American cities; the rise of the alter-globalization movement with its common appeal to “global justice”; and the expansion of critical research by professional experts, located within several areas of the social sciences, agencies of the United Nations, and the wider field of civil society.

In other words, the universe of potential arguments contained within the liberal “trade orthodoxy” or episteme⁷ has undergone a change which has been provoked by contrarian voices. In order to better understand the historical evolution of trade politics, including assessing whose agency is articulated and how, we need to plot how substantial such change has been, both in theory and practice. As part of a larger investigation into this question,⁸ this chapter addresses a particular focus on the ties between social critique and global trade politics: the cultivation of research-intensive, policy-facing groups. The immediate touchstone for this type of enquiry would be trade literature on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or civil society actors. Here, authors have explored a number of worthy themes over the past two decades, including debates about NGO access to, and critiques of, World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiation processes, the relevant size of the “NGO community,” and the specific impact of advocacy work on particular trade issues (such as in respect to access to medicines or agricultural concerns).⁹

Nonetheless, the precise relationship between knowledge, activism, and agency in the regulation of trade is still in need of further investigation. Erin Hannah’s scholarship has offered one of the more astute readings of changes in this space. In Hannah’s view, a “new brand of actor” has emerged over recent years: socially progressive “embedded NGOs” that “seek to re-embed global markets in broader social and

environmental values.”¹⁰ Such agents “accept the basic tenets of free trade as essential for development and poverty alleviation,” but try to highlight and empower vulnerable actors via detailed policy advice. For instance, the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) is a good example of a so-called embedded NGO. As Hannah argues, such research-focused collectives “are central to the construction of conventional wisdom about the limits and possibilities of trade.”¹¹

A similar interest in the culture and policy impacts of ICTSD is also seen in Paul Mably’s analysis.¹² Through a focus on the G33 coalition in the WTO, Mably argues that sympathetic ICTSD research on the G33 worked to “legitimize” the group and lend its members “a higher level of credibility” in trade negotiations. Thus, these studies help us to better grasp the making, and significance, of a specific type of professional critic common to the world of trade policy analysis.¹³

The argument of this chapter connects with such scholarship, but also seeks to offer a distinctive double contribution in theory and empirics. In respect to the former, the rest of the argument debates how enquiries into the nexus between knowledge and power in trade policy can be enhanced through a richer sociological analysis. This particular conceptual orientation has only been explored in limited ways within scholarship on trade politics. The deployment of Bourdieu’s arsenal on symbolic power is designed to offer a corrective to such analytical lacunas, particularly through charting the struggles over legitimation that characterize the trade policy world.

In respect to the latter, the chapter concentrates on Oxfam International as a revealing case of research-intensive activism on trade policy. Oxfam’s trade campaigns have received some dedicated academic inspection, particularly around its fair trade initiatives and its contribution to the “Making Poverty History” movement.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there has been less attention on tracing the historical emergence of Oxfam’s position in the trade policy field and how, in particular, it sought to improve its research outputs through a process of adaptation. Thus, this chapter aims not only to elucidate some features of this recent history, but to conduct the evaluation through the prism of symbolic power, to the details of which we can now turn.

The symbolic power of knowledge

In the broader study of world politics, the potential utility of Bourdieu as a theoretical inspiration has sparked increased interest in recent years, mirroring the appropriation of his ideas elsewhere in the social

sciences. Bourdieu has been framed in light of the so-called “practice turn” in International Relations (IR), which has sought to conceive of political action in ways not captured by purposeful instrumental rationality (logic of consequences), norms (logic of appropriateness), or communicative action (logic of arguing).¹⁵ This interest has been particularly strong among scholars who address the politics of international security and diplomacy.¹⁶ Indeed, the extent to which Bourdieu has now “made it” in IR can be illustrated by special volumes dedicated to analyzing his work and how it can inform international political explanations.¹⁷ However, notwithstanding these developments, so far at least, Bourdieu’s concepts have rarely been used for enhancing our understanding of the politics of the world economy—a neglect that this chapter aims to address.

The application of the conceptual framework of symbolic power to the specific study of the research-intensive civil society groups on trade is certainly not an automatic move. However, this chapter suggests that Bourdieu’s ideas do have merit and can enrich our understanding of political practice within this particular domain of capitalism. Bourdieu was a polyglot who studied philosophy and taught himself anthropology, before developing a significant corpus of sociological research. Rather than rigidly impose his concepts, he is treated here as an intellectual stimulus, not a prophet. A perspective on symbolic power brings forward a series of sub-concepts. With an eye on relational analysis, these “thinking tools” work together to form a larger theoretical design. By way of initial introduction, symbolic power offers a way to conceptualize how existing forms of power acquire legitimacy or, as Bourdieu would put it, pass as (mis)recognized. It places particular attention on how language, as a preeminent (although not the only) symbolic system, both reflects and constitutes power, to the extent that the notion of power is considered intertwined with the idea of legitimation.¹⁸

Following earlier arguments made elsewhere, this chapter argues that there are three major contributions of this perspective to the study of international trade politics.¹⁹ First, such a framework offers new objects for investigation that are either discounted or underplayed in common debates on power in trade politics. Against the coercive, realist power vision, which tends to treat language either as some “ephemeral” feature of diplomatic tussles or as the dry preoccupation of lawyers, the idea of symbolic power can be deployed to explore the properties of the “linguistic market,” a Bourdieusian expression for a bounded social space where only certain arguments acquire legitimacy. For the author of *Distinction*,²⁰ there is a panoply of linguistic methods

that may be interlaced with power, but the role of classification systems is particularly important. Inspired by the classical anthropology of Durkheim and Mauss²¹ and the philosophical anthropology of Cassirer,²² Bourdieu argues that classifications of the social world matter because they may have a determining effect on many practices operating at lower levels of abstraction; indeed, this is often a stated goal. For instance, when applied to the WTO, one can point to many classifications that have a political significance across national institutions and territories, not only in reference to particular trade agreements but also in the form of generic identity categories (such as the taken-for-granted developed/developing/least developed country schema). At the same time, in a further effort to tease out why only certain ideas are legitimate in the linguistic market, Bourdieu uses the twin notions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy to probe critically how the conventional wisdom is framed, rather than to rarify the commonsense as an ordinary state of affairs.

Second, once power is understood to flow through language, the analysis of symbolic power can inform our understanding of core political processes. In terms of participation, a Bourdieusian approach works against the standard view of power as a scarce resource marshaled by an elite population. In contrast, he points to the diffuse, everyday practices of justificatory claim making which shape definitions of political practices and yet, crucially, are often not read as expressions of power (as historically defined). In other words, symbolic power is a kind of “denied” power in which the explicit declaration of self-interest is downplayed. This does not mean that privileged players are incapable of wielding such power in an intentional way (*à la* rational choice); rather, Bourdieu seeks to reveal how many practices would not be sustainable if they appeared to emanate from the pursuit of pure self-interest. Thus, agents need to cultivate symbolic power in order to insulate themselves from criticism. Such insights have consequences for how we plot change in trade talks, including enriching the analysis of coalitions²³ and the links between language and political mobilization.²⁴

In respect to agenda setting, Bourdieu’s concepts shed new light on old problems. Particularly relevant for the trade context are the ties he draws between law, politics, and methods of institutionalization. Law itself is symbolic power *par excellence*, a monumental body of knowledge that works to codify publically particular interests into the universal.²⁵ Such a point is admittedly captured in some uses of the notion of institutional power or in wider constructivist theorizing that has traced the legal legitimacy of WTO rules and norms.²⁶ However, the

symbolic power framework can be distinguished by how deeply the politics of law are dissected, uncovering not only how interests are defended and distorted through law, but also via more subtle euphemisms and sleights of hand.²⁷

Third, and related, it may appear that the competition over symbolic power acquires a degree of autonomy from the material world it supposedly represents. The trade policy game seems to turn upon itself, with players engrossed in the chips and prizes that they have intersubjectively valued. However, this depiction is only partially correct. The stakes for controlling symbolic power in the world economy are high because they shape the configuration and stabilization of particular material interests. For instance, as other authors have argued, the Uruguay Round settlement, which gave birth to the WTO, also consecrated legally justifiable rules which protect highly profitable corporate rents.²⁸ Thus, it should not be surprising that the actors who benefit from such material gains will seek to safeguard and consolidate the outcomes of the Uruguay Round (either in the WTO or other trade forums). In this example, the notion of symbolic power could enter as a conceptual device for examining three core problems: (i) to unmask how the historical genesis of such legal classifications was shaped by particular corporate entities; (ii) given the universalization of these rules and norms, to reveal how major business interests will likely have an upper hand in subsequent trade agendas; and (iii) to shed light on how the freedom of actors who are critical of dominant legal framings will be constrained by the classification struggles of the past. In sum, informed by a desire to expose social inequities and against liberal meliorist sensibilities, a Bourdieusian interpretation of materialism aims to uncover the often-elaborate forms of social labor used to conserve and transform capital.

The call by Bourdieu for an expanded definition of political and economic interest—ranging from calculating strategies to masked or even unconscious practices—also matters for addressing the relationship between compulsory power and symbolic power. In one crucial sense, my argument is not only that a vision of power that is fixated on materialism represents a narrow interpretation but, in addition, how a symbolic power framework can help us to better grasp under what conditions forms of materialism, including coercive acts, acquire added analytical meaning. For instance, actions of compulsory power are sometimes used to deal quickly with a threat that cannot be accomplished by more time-consuming and strenuous processes of symbolic power accumulation. The coercive move may be used to cut short or disfigure a rival process of legitimation, but one would need to examine

the content of such symbolic power to understand why compulsory power was being exercised at that point in time. Equally, if following the deployment of compulsory power, a certain actor has a damaged reputation, it may be very necessary for them to rebuild their stock of symbolic power around an issue. Such episodes reveal that coercion is usually rare and expensive because of the fundamental need to appeal to different logics of legitimacy in capitalist relations, an historical trend that arguably has become more pronounced. Indeed, because of the importance of protecting symbolic power, the agent who has potential compulsory power may resort to exercising their dictates behind closed doors—that is, away from other audiences that could expose the contradictions and cruelty of such measures.

In essence, symbolic power is a different concept in how it allows for the durability and inertia of certain political relations and conditions of (mis)recognition, yet still facilitates scope for examining how agents actively remake the social world through historical tools of cognition. Importantly, the definition of symbolic power cannot be succinctly fixed and applied to all situations, but rather should be treated here as an “open concept” that acquires meaning through the labor of empirical research. Thus, in conversation with Wacquant, in a point Bourdieu often underscored, concepts are no good unless they are put into action in a “systematic fashion.”²⁹ With this in mind, we can now turn to address how Bourdieu’s sense of the symbolic power of knowledge can be applied to the study of Oxfam’s activism on trade.

Oxfam’s trade policy research through the lens of symbolic power

Oxfam International represents a pertinent example of the relationship between alternative thinking on trade politics and advocacy work. From its earliest activism on fair trade in the 1940s, to the larger “global justice” campaigns around the turn of the millennium, Oxfam has carved out a significant voice on many trade policy concerns. In one sense, when compared with other civil society groups and charities, Oxfam is unusual in terms of its size: in the 2012/13 year, for instance, the total income of the organization was €955 million, with over 10,000 permanent staff working in a confederative structure across 93 countries.³⁰ This geographical reach, fieldwork exposure, and deep legacy of engagements with policymaking processes at a variety of levels does, nonetheless, make Oxfam a good test of wider trends that have marked struggles between social critique and capitalism. Indeed, it will be suggested, notably in respect to certain campaigning techniques and presentation methods, that Oxfam representatives have been

entrepreneurs in the cultivation of a particular activist subjectivity. With Bourdieu's symbolic power framework in mind, this section plots and dissects some of the learning strategies and practices that have characterized Oxfam's recent research on trade. In particular, to better reveal the distinctiveness of the symbolic power that has been cultivated around forms of trade analysis, the argument compares efforts pursued in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the subsequent period until the mid-2000s.

Within the 1980s, Oxfam's attention to trade policy was often intertwined with other economic issues, notably debt and aid, and how such problems contributed to hunger in Southern countries. In the wake of the Cambodian and Ethiopian crises, under the directorship of Frank Judd (1985–91), the group began to make further investments in research. Like today, these efforts were targeted at Oxfam's own supporters in order to help them understand the difficult issues under scrutiny which, in turn, would assist in fundraising strategies. In addition, the same research also aimed to be cogently packaged to political decision makers, an objective that required demonstrating empirical command of relevant issues.³¹

During the late 1980s, under the "Hungry for Change" campaign frame, Oxfam produced a number of reports that, in retrospect, formed a basic template for future research projects. We see here experimentation with a number of augmentation themes, of which three are notable. First, the idea of an occasional overview report is established, one that synthesizes together interconnected problems, before offering policy recommendations.³² Second, a variety of types of evidence are marshaled within these reports in an effort to provoke and persuade the reader, including drawing upon Oxfam's own field officers, data from international organizations and other literature sources. In terms of methods, descriptive statistical analysis is given a prominent position, along with specific case study boxes and illustrative photos. Third, the use of catchy one-liners is included to add a degree of "flair" to publicity, often through encapsulating some sense of injustice, such as: "For every £1 the world contributed to famine relief in Africa in 1985, the West took back £2 in debt repayment."³³

Nonetheless, when one turns to the actual subject matter of trade policy debated by Oxfam around this time, some insiders have expressed reservations about its content and effectiveness. In 1991, Kevin Watkins joined the group from the Catholic Institute of International Relations, rising from policy analyst up to the position of head of research. Over the next decade, Watkins proved a very significant research leader who sharpened Oxfam's attention on trade policy. One

of the major lessons that Watkins took from the 1980s and 1990s, when the Uruguay Round was being negotiated, was that activists on trade politics were left significantly behind the main actions that shaped the agenda: corporate lobbying of Western governments.³⁴ As he expressed it: “When I joined Oxfam, NGO advocacy on trade was very limited both in terms of its ambition and approach.”³⁵ Watkins was concerned that analysis tended to focus almost exclusively around terms of trade in agriculture and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) surpluses which, while being important, overlooked the wider General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) agenda around textiles, services, investment, and intellectual property.³⁶ At a higher level of abstraction, reflecting his own normative positioning, he was against more radical “anti-trade” or “anti-growth” reasoning heard within some quarters of Oxfam. Instead, Watkins suggested that “it was possible, within certain limits, if you could work the system effectively, to secure small gains in market access for developing countries.”³⁷ It was this more moderate political disposition, one that called for dissecting and unpicking the trade orthodoxy and searching for new policy opportunities, that would characterize much of Oxfam’s research in the 1990s and early 2000s.

As the WTO was established in 1995, Oxfam’s trade policy research became increasingly focused around agendas emanating from Geneva. Along with a larger summary book, *The Oxfam Poverty Report*,³⁸ Watkins authored another substantive report on agricultural rules and food security,³⁹ while other researchers analyzed the North American Free Trade Agreement,⁴⁰ as well as the relationship between trade and the “new issues” of labor rights and the environment.⁴¹ Nonetheless, in a common pattern that is witnessed elsewhere in the “NGO industry,” political windows of opportunity strongly structure the direction and content of research activities. In this respect, the period surrounding the WTO Seattle Ministerial in 1999, which featured efforts to launch a new trade round of talks, provided the necessary moment to mobilize intellectual and activist energies. For instance, in terms of the volume of outputs, from 1999 to 2001, 26 publications focused on trade politics, including traditional topics such as agriculture, but also other concerns related to the WTO’s institutional design, the access to medicines case, and gender issues. By contrast, in the entire period from 1980 to 1998, 19 publications featured trade discussions. A second window of opportunity pivoted around the following WTO ministerial conference, held in Cancún in 2003. In respect to the period from 2002 to 2004, Oxfam’s trade policy-focused work increased even further, publishing a total of 75 pieces. In the context of shifting configurations

of diplomatic power in WTO negotiations, including the notable activism of the G20 and G33 coalitions to contest the United States-European Union duopoly, this particular window marked the high-water mark of Oxfam's coverage on trade policy.⁴²

The case of the West African cotton dispute can be highlighted here as an interesting piece of Oxfam-led activism that marked this latter period. The problem centered on a coalition of West and Central African (WCA) countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad—which began campaigning in 2003 at the WTO for the liberalization of cotton trade. In a nutshell, the problem concerned how these countries, as highly competitive cotton producers, tried to engineer greater access to third markets, particularly China, in order to enhance their market access opportunities. This quartet of countries argued, however, that such export potential was being impeded by highly subsidized US cotton farmers, whose own competitiveness was artificially inflated. The issue quickly became a contentious lightning rod and absorbed a considerable portion of the WTO's negotiating energy, including spawning a major, related dispute settlement case by Brazil against the United States.⁴³

Oxfam, along with a network of other civil society players, played a significant role in the very creation of “African cotton” as a political problem that needed WTO attention. Although it is often tricky to identify the precise significance of these contributions and how, in particular, WCA officials interpreted their activism, it is safe to say that the initiative would not have been the same without such input. In the first place, the work of Watkins needs to be credited with mainstreaming the empirical connection between US cotton subsidies and WCA livelihoods. His 2002 report, *Cultivating Poverty*—backed by strong statistical analysis, a political critique of US cotton policy, and quotes from WCA farmers—had a key impact in terms of increasing information awareness.⁴⁴ As *Cultivating Poverty* became more widely read and cited, Oxfam's Geneva-based advocacy team plotted how cotton could be articulated in the WTO context. In particular, researchers such as Céline Charveriat and Romain Benicchio consulted with lawyers and analysts based at ICTSD, a major research hub on trade policy mentioned earlier.⁴⁵ ICTSD became important in terms of building solidarity between African missions in Geneva, as well as connecting ambassadors with other relevant actors, such as a Senegal-based network called Environment and Development Action in the Third World.⁴⁶ By the end of 2004, following a decision from WTO members that cotton would be addressed “ambitiously, expeditiously, and specifically,”⁴⁷ Oxfam produced two further cotton-specific reports in an effort to maintain political momentum around the issue.⁴⁸

To return to the conceptual ambitions on symbolic power, what can be learnt about Oxfam's research strategies around trade policy? Three themes are worth further exploring. First, demonstrating command of what is legitimate knowledge remains the *sine qua non* for professionals in this social world. All critiques that are developed by Oxfam authors are thus founded upon an understanding of "orthodox" trade knowledge or, to be precise, the particular "sanctified" knowledge that is relevant to the problem under scrutiny. The symbolic power associated with this knowledge may embrace a range of theories, principles, modes of reasoning, agendas, and histories that are attached to the trade policy game. Oxfam reports will often tap into, and play with, many of these forms of symbolic power in an effort to sway the reader and demonstrate credibility. For instance, at the disciplinary level, economics and law have been the major academic fields that have provided education or, in more prescriptive terms, training, in the subject of international commercial exchange. In other words, these disciplines have stood as the "admission gateways," to invoke a term with a Bourdieu inflection, that aspiring experts have to pass through in order to acquire a (or the most) legitimate right to speak on trade. In the most profound sense, economists and lawyers draw upon, in both conscious and implicit ways, the pre-existing legitimacy associated with such canonical bodies of knowledge. This combined stock of symbolic power—when one considers its historical construction over centuries, its transnational reach from Western centers of power to "emerging" or marginalized locations and, in particular, its incorporation into rules and customs of modern statehood—is monumental and resists easy summation.⁴⁹

Given that almost all other policy-facing knowledge producers on trade—from government officials, to experts within international organizations, to academic consultants—build their arguments through the prism of economic and legal theories, the Oxfam analyst who rejects this foundation of symbolic power would likely have a very short career (indeed, given competitive entry conditions, they would probably never be hired). To recall, therefore, this point concurs with Bourdieu's larger argument that symbolic power is partly constructed in an effort to protect agents from forms of criticism. For instance, in the aforementioned Oxfam literature, one often sees an engagement with precise legal rules or economic modeling of the effects of certain agreements. Under Watkins's leadership, in a point confirmed by others who have walked in his footsteps, the empirical "standard" of Oxfam's research has improved when compared with the 1980s and early 1990s,⁵⁰ but the meaning of "improvement," in this respect, is partially

a judgment on the capacity to understand “the legitimate vision of the social world and its divisions.”⁵¹ Within this particular space of civil society professionals, the accumulation of symbolic power involves mastering the principles of legitimacy that shape the parameters and substance of the policy game, a process which, in turn, gives all players a sense of shared identity. In short, only those who speak in the legitimate tongue—who know their Pareto from their Kaldor-Hicks in efficiency criteria, their amber box from their blue box in agricultural domestic support, or their mode one from their mode four in services negotiations—may pass through the entrance gates and fight for the symbolic and material prizes that await.

Once this process of persuasion is underway, a second theme of relevance can begin: the incorporation of a heterodox critique to distinguish the Oxfam opinion from orthodox speakers. Such strategies of positionality in the intellectual marketplace are crucial for attracting attention and maintaining institutional status. In keeping with the historical legacy of social critiques of capitalism, the Oxfam writer is traditionally imbued with a social justice sensibility, including a capacity to unearth and trace forms of human suffering beneath the veneer of orthodox knowledge. In this sense, pure forms of economic and legal knowledge are not the only sources of symbolic power that are nurtured by Oxfam authors to mount their trade campaigns. We also see explicit and tacit appeals to other systems and techniques of legitimation, notably Christian values of care and compassion for “distant suffering” beyond the West. In some instances, the object of critique is clear, such as in the *Cultivating Poverty* report where the policies of the US government are strongly attacked.⁵² At other times, carving out a heterodox critique on trade policy is more delicate or limited in scope. Regardless of the precise level of ambition, Oxfam analysts frequently target the tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions expressed in orthodox formulations of trade practice. In the words of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, they are found “tightening up” the “tests of justification”—that is, to make whatever is the test under scrutiny (“WTO is good for development,” “WTO enables fair negotiations,” etc.) “stricter.”⁵³ Such activity may not accomplish its objectified goal—the removal of a certain agenda or set of rules—but could instead complicate and, importantly, slow down particular policymaking processes.

A final theme of importance would build upon this analysis of alternative sources of symbolic power, but address the style, rather than the precise analytical substance, of such publications. In a visual, screen-based culture, where the Internet serves as a major channel of political communication and images of all kinds can be digitally

manipulated, the stylistic packaging of Oxfam's arguments has arguably become more significant. One could also include under this theme the attention to publication titles, headlines and other one-liners that are often penned in an exciting prose designed to grab the attention of audiences. Such trends in presentation methods are obviously systemic and now inform the contemporary public relations of countless organizations beyond Oxfam. However, one pioneering feature of Oxfam's reports centers on the use of select quotes (along with photographs) from the field, whereby the voice of a farmer or producer helps to justify the overall argument. In particular, such quotes help to form an opposition between, on the one hand, economic and legal "scientific" knowledge (such as in the form of statistics, models, rules and customs of trade) and, on the other hand, the "common layperson" who exists "on the ground," removed from "higher-level" professional and expert politics. These quotes of the marginalized poor are often positioned near the beginning of Oxfam reports. As elements within an argumentation scheme, they sometimes exist in a tense or ambiguous relationship with the subsequent analysis: either as enlightening the sterilized scientific knowledge with a human association or, in other contexts, seeming to stand apart as the "true" and "most authentic" source of revelation. It is also worth noting that such symbolic features are not without controversy when seen through postcolonial eyes, reflecting a larger "commodity diversity" emotive feel that is common to the current liberal episteme.⁵⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to shine a brief spotlight on some of the strategies pursued by Oxfam's trade-focused research through the conceptual prism of symbolic power. By way of conclusion, and as a pathway for further research, three caveats need to be made. First, a richer understanding of the location of Oxfam analysts in the trade policy field can only be adequately grasped through an analysis of other knowledge producers—rivals and allies—who inhabit the same social world. This point was alluded to in the chapter, but a more detailed exploration would also unpick the working practices of orthodox-leaning experts, such as those who move within the WTO Secretariat, the World Bank or, more diffusely, policy-facing economists and lawyers. At the same time, the sense of self that is cultivated by Oxfam researchers is also, in part, a product of distinguishing themselves from heterodox intellectuals who may have limited impact on the political world but, nonetheless, share a similar normative

worldview. Through such analysis, one would, in Bourdieu's terminology, begin to chart and decipher the relationship between symbolic power, social space, and position taking.

Second, a deeper investigation into this area would, in addition to providing further context on the political economy, also reveal some of the internal tensions operating within Oxfam over the past three decades. Every external presentation of strategy—the choice of which trade problem to publicize, how to address the issue, how to mobilize constituents, or how to handle any subsequent criticism—will inevitably feature choices over direction in a constrained environment. Explaining such decision-making processes would help us to gain a perspective on the often-intense labor process involved in deploying symbolic power.

Third, through such objectified research, one will also hope to provide certain insights into the potential for more emancipatory forms of trade politics. To imagine substantive alternatives to the present configuration between material structures and symbolic structures, one must first understand how the orthodox-arguing universe constrains freedom of expression, including the imagination to think of alternatives. The collective labor of Oxfam researchers, in addition to other like-minded social movements interested in trade policy, stands as an interesting illustration of how contemporary social critique can push back against the justificatory boundaries of capitalism. One potential—although by no means invulnerable—general strategy would involve further exploring and testing of sources of symbolic power that are not easily captured by capitalism. For instance, as noted, Oxfam's appeals to social justice are partly informed by quasi-religious connotations, a sense of family life, or more general ideals of a "common humanity."

In other words, social critique derives its energy from revealing the roots of indignation, including cries for liberation, the removal of human suffering, and the unmasking of inauthentic persons and objects.⁵⁵ Here, reviving the notion of exploitation in relation to trade politics—in all its obvious and subtle forms—should be at the heart of an emancipatory vision. For sure, capitalism is always, at the same time, revising its answers to these demands, but a research agenda on global trade that casts an unflinching and critical gaze on such themes would probably be more robust and, at the same time, more problematic to those who benefit from existing forms of power.

Notes

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