

Book Review: Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization

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This book investigates the complex relationship between power and legitimation by drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power, aiming to advance the broader understanding of power in world politics. Graduate students in political science, economics, international law, globalisation and International Relations will find an interesting balance between theory and analysis of the cotton industry at a global scale, writes Yves Laberge.

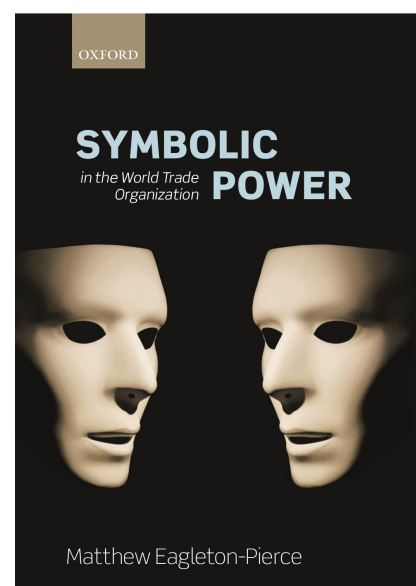
Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization. Matthew Eagleton-Pierce. Oxford University Press. December 2012.

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[Matthew Eagleton-Pierce](#)'s first book – adapted from his Ph.D. dissertation – argues that the World Trade Organization operates and express its domination through various ways, with the author stating that “one needs to think about power in the WTO system broadly rather than narrowly, to the extent that brute diplomatic moves or economic structures represent only one face of power” (p. 3). Moreover, the author adds that capitalism must always create and reinforce in subtle ways its own forms of legitimisation: “How these representations of legitimacy are socially constructed and contested forms part of the *symbolic face* of power, the central focus of enquiry in this book” (p. 3).

This concept of symbolic power will sound familiar to scholars already aware of the works by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002).

And as Bourdieu once wrote in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*: “Every established order tends to produce... the naturalization of its own arbitrariness”. Following Bourdieu's writings, symbolic power is understood here as an “open concept” (p. 161), which “involves the ability to construct and impose the ‘legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions’” (p. 3). In this case, symbolic power is the intangible force that is nevertheless an essential dimension in the dynamics of international trade. However, this new book with a rich conceptualisation is not exclusively devoted to Pierre Bourdieu's orthodoxy and theories. The works of other thinkers are conveyed, including Erving Goffman's concept of framing, Alastair Iain Johnson's use of mimicry, Michel Foucault's reflections on power, and Homi Bhabha's related works on the ‘ironic compromise’.



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Right from the start, Eagleton-Pierce indicates that this book takes seriously “the difficult task of trying to put concepts into action” (p. 14). And therefore, this *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* is not limited to a mere theoretical exercise. Studying institutional power within WTO during the last five years, in the era of the Doha Round negotiations, the author explains how four African countries (Bénin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad, labelled as the “Cotton Four”) became recognized as “the competing kings of cotton” (p. 84). In the chapter of the same name, the author observes that beyond the real competition that pits these four countries against the USA and EU, it seems obvious that “at the centre of the cotton story is a struggle over competitiveness or, more precisely, *competing representations of legitimacy in claims of competitiveness*” (p. 118; see also p. 84). Obvious examples of symbolic power in action are also presented in Chapter 5; for example, in cases where WTO members in conflict over agricultural trade negotiations would depict their opponents as “obstructionists” and present themselves in positive terms such as aiming for “new trade flows” (p. 148). These conflicts around WTO roundtables often oppose wealthy nations to developing countries, or oppose Northern with Southern states.

Although Bourdieu’s works and concepts are salient in this study, Eagleton-Pierce avoids referring to the habitus, the concept for which Bourdieu is most known. But on the other hand, typical Bourdieusian concepts such as “doxa” (i.e. “the point of view of those who dominate” that is imposed as being universal) are brought in and applied (p. 54).

Despite its strengths, I have two minor quibbles about this otherwise very good book. First, some sources appearing in the endnotes are incomplete, for example this reference to the article “Rethinking the state: Genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field”, attributed solely to Pierre Bourdieu, should have included co-authors Loic J. D. Wacquant and Samar Farage (see endnote 25, p. 188). Also, I would disagree with the author’s use of “complicated”, where he refers to “the complicated effects of symbolic power” (p. 121); I would rather borrow the term complexity, which implies dense inner logics and dialectics instead of the nonsense usually linked with the word “complicated”.

In sum, *Symbolic Power in the World Trade Organization* can undoubtedly be seen as a strong debut by a promising scholar. Eagleton-Pierce writes clearly and efficiently; the concepts and ideas brought in are always defined and operationally discussed, although undergraduates might feel challenged by such a dense text linking concepts drawn from many disciplines and some international case studies. Because all chapters deal firstly with the core concept of power, graduate students in political science, economics, international law, globalisation and International Relations, or even agriculture will find here an interesting balance between theory and analysis of the cotton industry at a global scale. There are not so many books in International Relations today that rely on Bourdieu’s thought and it is too bad since his sociological concepts are so useful and efficient whenever one wishes to criticise capitalism and its “invisible rules”. And potential readers should not avoid this book because it seems to concentrate only on the WTO; this rich conceptual framework centred on symbolic power could easily be transposed to other world organisations and NGOs for future studies.

Dr. Yves Laberge is a Canadian sociologist. He is Associate fellow at the Groupe de recherche EA 1796, ACE, at the Département d’anglais of the Université européenne de Haute-Bretagne (Rennes 2, France). He serves as a Series editor for the Book series “L’espace public” and “Cinéma et société” at Les Presses de l’Université Laval, and also for a Parisian publisher, L’Harmattan. Among various publications, Yves Laberge has contributed more than 100 articles and entries in a dozen of encyclopedias and reference books. [Read more reviews by Yves.](#)