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Introduction

Theorizing European Union Trade Politics: Contending or Complementary Paradigms?

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Abstract

This special issue aims to take the first step towards an inter-paradigmatic debate in the study of European Union trade politics. In this introduction we highlight the importance of trade as an EU policy domain that is currently undergoing radical changes. We also give a brief overview of the literature on EU trade politics, pointing to the fragmentation of different theoretical approaches. Furthermore, we suggest that more dialogue between different paradigms may be fruitful. We conclude by situating the contributions to this special issue in terms of their theoretical and ontological perspectives.

Keywords

Paradigms; trade policy; IR; EU

Different, often contending and perhaps even conflicting theories have tried to explain the European Union (EU) in general and EU external trade policies in particular. This special issue aims to take the first step towards an inter-paradigmatic debate in the study of EU trade politics. The common commercial policy is one of the oldest common policy domains of the EU and also the most powerful area of its foreign policy. The political importance of EU trade policy has considerably increased over the past twenty years. The conduct of trade policy has equally become more and more contested by politicians and non-governmental organizations (Young and Peterson 2006). The coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, which upgraded the role of the European Parliament in trade policy-making and extended the EU's competences to 'behind the border' issues such as investment, intellectual property rights and services, has further reinforced these trends. Since the negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) have been stalled, the EU has embarked on an ambitious agenda of bilateral free trade agreements. Since the end 2000s EU preferential trade agreements are no longer exclusively directed at developing or neighbouring countries: industrialized trading powers such as South Korea (signed in 2010), Japan, Canada and the United States are the new priorities for the EU's bilateral trade agenda. The launch of the negotiations on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) with the US in July 2013 was a remarkable achievement in itself. The issues on the negotiation table are wide ranging and will continue to spark public debates in the years to come. The European Commission argues that a transatlantic trade agreement would stimulate economic growth in Europe and thereby contribute to solving the economic crisis. In addition, the EU-US trade talks have a geo-political dimension, not at least in reaction to the emergence of China and the proliferation of trade agreements in Asia. More closely to its own borders, the EU has also started trade negotiations with countries such as Ukraine (initialed in 2012), Moldova and Georgia. While these markets are less important for the EU from an economic perspective, the geopolitical relevance of the trade arrangements as part of Europe's wider Neighbourhood Policy cannot be underestimated.

In short, EU trade politics are undergoing fascinating changes. The involvement of new actors within the EU (e.g. the European Parliament), the bilateral negotiations with new trading partners (e.g. the US), the emergence of new venues (e.g. bilateral negotiations) and new issues (e.g. investment) within a changing internal (e.g. eurocrisis) and international (e.g. multipolarity) context will undoubtedly stimulate a new wave of academic research into the politics of EU trade. Understanding and explaining these evolutions will require innovative and sophisticated theoretical tools. In doing so, scholars can build on a relatively large existing literature. During the last fifteen years, academic research on the EU's external trade policies has expanded rapidly. A once

neglected policy domain of the EU caught an increasing amount of attention from scholars.

This has generated an extensive, but at the same time highly fragmented literature. There are two characteristics with regard to the resulting research. The first is that the analysis of EU trade policy-making has been increasingly refined, starting with questions of competence and the resulting institutional dynamics (Meunier & Nicolaïdis 1999) and leading to accounts on the resulting trade policy outcomes, and the causal mechanisms that mattered in the generation of such outcomes. Factors such as the interaction between path dependencies and unintended consequences (Young 2004; Hanson 1998), the interaction between majority requirements and policy preferences (Meunier 2000), and principal-agent dynamics have been prominently present in these (Delreux & Kerremans 2010; Damro 2007; Frennhoff-Larsen 2007; Elsig 2007; Kerremans 2004), this with a growing attention for the interplay between the EU-decision-making process internally, and the specific external context in which trade policies is being developed (the WTO, the context of competitive liberalization) (Sbragia 2010; Young 2007; Dür 2007; Zimmerman 2007; Billiet 2006; De Bièvre 2006).

The second characteristic of the analysis of EU trade policy-making has been the increasing convergence between rational choice approaches (or scholarly work strongly inspired by it) and constructivist insights into the role of ideas, identities and discourses (cf. Siles-Brügge 2011; Orbie 2011; Daugbjerg & Swinbank 2009; Richardson 2009; Niemann 2004; Van den Hoven 2004; Elsig 2000). In addition, there have been a number of studies based on critical theory (De Ville and Orbie 2013; Hurt 2012; Langan 2011; Storey 2006), although this is still a minority in the EU trade policy literature.

Most work on the EU's trade policies is organized on thematic lines. Four relatively recent special issues are indicative of this: 'The European Union and the New Trade Politics', co-edited by Alasdair Young and John Peterson (2006); 'The EU in International Trade Negotiations', co-edited by Andreas Dür and Hubert Zimmermann (2007); 'The social dimension of EU trade politics', co-edited by Fabienne Bossuyt, Myriam Gistelinck, Bart Kerremans, Jan Orbie and Lisa Tortell (2009); and 'The Politics of EU Trade and Development', co-edited by Maurizio Carbone and Jan Orbie (2014 forthcoming) – respectively dealing with the new trade-related issues, the EU's external trade negotiations, the social-trade linkage, and the trade-development nexus.

Overall however, the attention for different paradigms in the study of the EU's external trade policies has been more implicit than explicit. Only a few authors tend to explicitly engage in a debate between different paradigms in their search for an explanation of trade policy processes or outcomes in the EU. This is in the first place the case for these authors that write outside a rational choice perspective. To be sure, there has been a gradual reduction in distance between rational choice approaches and some work that is heavily inspired by constructivist thinking. Some of the authors that have been involved in this rapprochement are included in this special issue. On the other hand there seems to be a continuing (and possibly even growing) distance between mainstream approaches to EU trade politics and radical or critical approaches.

This project has been inspired by a frustration over the fragmentation of the existing literature and the near-absence of inter-paradigmatic dialogue. Building on previous insights, this special issue attempts to shift the focus towards the theoretical debate per se, by engaging in a debate between different theoretical perspectives, including theoretical perspectives that are considered to be out of the mainstream, such as critical theory and critical political economy. A general feeling behind this special issue is that, warranted or not, IR theory and EU studies face a situation of growing mutual insularity among authors that write in different paradigms (Walker 2010). Part of this fragmentation is understandable. Scholars from different backgrounds publish in different journals, tend to read each other's work only to a limited extent, and sometimes entertain biased, or even caricatured perceptions of each other's work and

findings. As different paradigms are often rooted in different ontologies and epistemologies, communication among them is far from evident. Indeed, scholars from different paradigms seem to speak in different languages. It would be naïve to believe that bringing scholars from different paradigmatic strands together will change this. That suddenly, they would start communicating in the same language. Such an evolution may not even be desirable.

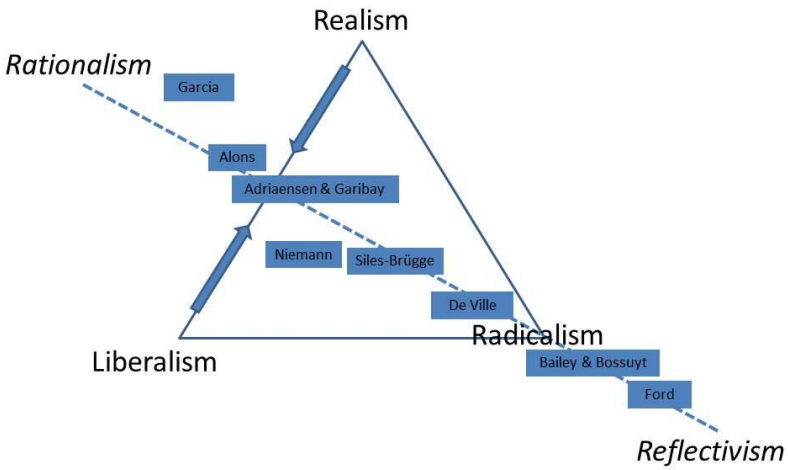
However, we start from the assumption that there may be potential in fostering a dialogue between such diversity of approaches. The distance among these so-called 'paradigms' may be smaller than it seems at first sight. It may also be that different paradigms approach the same questions from different, but complementary angles. And it may be the case that one paradigm may help another in the formulation and testing of alternative hypotheses and expectations, or in the development and use of new methodologies; or that it contributes to the sharpening of one's own arguments and assumptions. If that would be the case, a confrontation among different paradigms may yield new findings, or may deepen existing ones. There would be an added value then, to contention and even conflict. The scientific and practical relevance of our assumption on the merits of inter-paradigmatic dialogue will be elaborated in the concluding section of this special issue.

The purpose of this special issue is about bringing people from different strands of political science[1] together on a common theme with the aim of deepening and refining knowledge through debate and dialogue. There are several reasons why EU trade politics was chosen as the common theme. First, the EU constitutes a challenging but promising area for inter-paradigmatic dialogue. According to the pluralist model, the study of EU politics is 'an inherently multidisciplinary affair' and 'benefits from the inputs of work from diverse epistemological and methodological standpoints', since the EU is a 'new type of polity' (Rosamond 2006: 15). In an institutionally-unique setting such as the EU, 'the challenges of knowledge production are substantial and the stakes in reconciling work along other dimensions higher.' (Jupille 2006: 209) Second, we focus on EU trade because it closely corresponds to our own research expertise and because we believe that it is sufficiently specific to allow for a meaningful dialogue (ensuring that contributors talk about the same thing), while also being broad enough to allow for a wide variety of perspectives and interpretations. As argued above, trade constitutes one of the most important EU policy domains. EU trade policy also situates itself at the intersection of European integration studies, comparative politics, international relations and international political economy.

Therefore, we involved scholars from different paradigmatic traditions. In dialogue with the authors of this special issue, each contribution is situated on Figure 1 which represents the theoretical triangle of realism, liberalism and radicalism on the one hand, and the cross-cutting ontological divide between rationalist and reflectivist approaches on the other hand. While there are many other possible and more sophisticated ways to categorize the various debates between different paradigms, schools of thought, meta-theories etc., we will use this map as a heuristic device.

The articles by Gerry Alons and Maria Garcia come closest to a realist reading of EU trade policy. Alons stresses that a focus on member state preferences is essential for understanding EU trade policy. She illustrates this through her analysis of the preferences of Germany in the Uruguay Round negotiations on trade and agriculture. Alons uses an interest-based approach, although her analysis includes not only material but also ideational factors. Garcia presents the EU explicitly as a rationalist and realist trading actor that mainly aims to safeguard its economic interests in the international economic order. Her analysis also leaves room for ideational elements. The empirical focus is on the different preferential trade agreements negotiated by the EU, including bi-regional negotiations.

Figure 1: Situating the authors in the inter-paradigm debate (based on Waever 1996: 165)



Johan Adriaensen and Montserrat Gonzáles-Garibay remain close to the rationalist end of the continuum by arguing that the EU's policies are contingent upon a generic cost-effectiveness calculation constrained by the internal and external context where decisions on labour standards have been taken. Aiming to explain why the EU has been reluctant to include enforceable labour rights in trade agreements, the authors react against explanations in terms of what they call 'sui generis' and 'normative power' approaches and suggest that rational choice institutionalism may be more suitable.

On the other side of the spectrum, David Bailey and Fabienne Bossuyt also tend to criticize the notion of normative power Europe. From a critical social theory perspective, they castigate scholars' surprise with the discrepancy between the EU's rhetoric as a 'progressive force for good' on the one hand and the contents of its trade policy on the other hand. Instead, drawing on broad claims within the Marxist tradition, Bailey and Bossuyt conceptualize the EU as a site of domination. They identify three mechanisms of domination which are then applied to recent developments in EU trade policy, in particular the Global Europe agenda and the new trade agreements with Asian and Latin American countries. Lucy Ford's article also problematizes 'conventional' analyses of EU trade policy based on a critical realist approach. More specifically, her approach draws from neo-Gramscian theories and global political ecology, which focus the attention to respectively mechanisms of hegemony and challenges of sustainability. As such the author proposes a more holistic approach to studying EU trade policy. Ford illustrates her argument using examples from trade policy debates, such as the discussion on Investor-State Dispute Settlement disciplines and the extraction of petroleum from tar sands in the context of the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement.

The other three articles can be situated more in the middle of the inter-paradigmatic debate, even if important differences between the authors also exist. Gabriel Siles-Brügge develops an innovative constructivist framework in order to explain how the European Commission managed to complete the bilateral trade negotiations with South Korea despite the financial crisis and the opposition from powerful interest groups. The author argues that rationalist approaches in International Political Economy cannot explain this puzzle. Just like Alons and Garcia, he also examines the often overlooked role of ideas in trade policy; in line with Bailey and Bossuyt, and Ford, he stresses the importance of 'neoliberal understandings of socioeconomic order' in explaining the European Commission's trade strategies. Ferdi De Ville also starts with a critique of rational choice analyses of EU trade policy which he considers to be "a-historical" and "a-political". One difference with the previous article is that De Ville emphasizes the time

dimension: EU trade policy can only be understood by taking into account the influence of past policies and ideas. His theoretical framework constitutes a critical variant of historical institutionalism with 'reactive sequencing' as a core concept. As opposed to the narrower 'path-dependency' concept of what he calls 'conservative' historical institutionalism, reactive sequencing conceives of policy evolutions as chains of events produced by reactions and counter-reactions. Empirically, De Ville discusses the general strategic evolution of EU trade policy since the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and the Commission's 'Trade, Growth and World Affairs' communication.

Arne Niemann's revised neofunctionalist framework does not explicitly aim to provide a critical or normative perspective to EU politics, but rather to explain integration outcomes. Compared to the original neofunctionalism, this approach comes closer to constructivist ontologies concerning the socio-cognitive dimension and the mutual constitution of agency and structure. As such, also Niemann argues that rational choice dynamics cannot fully explain the outcomes. The ambitions of revised neofunctionalism are also more modest than the original version, e.g. by taking into account countervailing forces which lead to stagnation of or even opposition against integration. Empirically, Niemann applies this framework to the revision of the provisions on the EU's Common Commercial Policy in the Lisbon Treaty. He addresses the puzzle why the negotiations leading to the Lisbon Treaty entailed the transfer of competences in areas such as services, intellectual property rights and investment, where the previous negotiations on the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice Treaties largely failed to do so.

In the concluding article, the editors come back to the question of inter-paradigmatic dialogue that inspired this special issue project. In the first part, three questions are addressed: (i) Is it possible to engage in inter-paradigmatic dialogue?; (ii) Is such an exercise desirable?; and if so, (iii) How should this be achieved? We go back to the Kuhnian debate about the so-called incommensurability of different paradigms and argue that there is a need for engaged pluralism in political science. In the second part, we look at the extent to which a reading of the articles in this special issue indicates that a confrontation among different paradigms as well as between different theories can be or become a learning experience. We point to a number of commonalities among the articles, despite their often-different backgrounds, and reflect on a number of issues on which the different articles could dialogue better one to the other, this with reference to a causal chain. While this analysis also shows the limits and difficulties encountered during such an endeavor, it also makes clear that inter-paradigmatic dialogue may be more fruitful than often assumed, and that there is ample room for a more reflexive dialogue within the scholarly community.

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[1] We consider the discipline of political science broadly, including comparative politics, international relations (IR), international political economy (IPE), and European Union (EU) studies. However, we limit ourselves to debates *within* the discipline of political science. For calls for inter-disciplinarity in studying the EU, see e.g. Manners (2003) and Rumford and Murray (2003).

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