**Ph.D. Application**

***Title****: Implicit Ideological Effects and Power Use in the Neoliberal Discourse legitimised by the Discursive Practice of the WTO and Pro-Neoliberal Media Sources*

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Historical Context

From the 1980s, neoliberal policies were introduced in the international economy. This marked a break with post-war Keynesian economics which had been the dominant economic system; a shift in economic paradigms as neoliberal policies became dominant (Baylis 2008, 248). In comparison to Keynesian economics, an interventionist form of government policy, the neoliberal policies were oriented around *free trade and free market forces*,and the key assumption of this ideology was that these principles would create economic growth and harmonious relations between all worldwide (Baylis 2008, 247).

The paradigm shift took place during the office of American President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and reflected a key value of their time in office. The neoliberal ideology was presented as a natural successor to Keynesian economics in many ways - one of them being Thatcher’s acronym "TINA": "*There Is No Alternative*" (George 1999).

The primary institutions to implement the neoliberal ideology were the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT], i.e. subsequently the World Trade Organisation [WTO], the International Monetary Fund [IMF] and the World Bank. These institutions should govern international economic and trade relations and are the most institutionalised and influential organs in the international economy (Morrison 2006, 331).

## 1.2. The Critical Perspective

However, the neoliberal policies have been much debated over the years. According to critical voices, the policies was a making of two powerful nations without world consensus (Jackson 2012), i.e. many nations and social groups are perceived not to have had much influence in the implementation and prevalence of the neoliberal system which is expressed in a continuous contestation of its validity. Preliminary readings show a tendency that a few actors are shaping the terms of world trade, i.e. that the neoliberal policies are considered to only represent the ideology and serve the interests of a few dominant Western states and influential corporate interests (Shah 2011).

In this context, the situation appears complicated as the policies are believed to have had serious negative ramifications for the international economy in general, and that they, furthermore, have had a negative ripple effect on many different social groups.

On the large drawing board, there have been numerous debates about neoliberalism and its role in several crises of an economic character, e.g. the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the dotcom bubble in 2000/2001, and the international financial crisis in 2008. With regard to the last mentioned, retired professor from the London School of Economics, John Gray has stated that: "*The American free-market creed has self-destructed while countries that retained overall control of markets have been vindicated.*" (Gray 2008).

## 1.3. The Critical Perspective on the WTO

On a case level, the WTO has caused much controversy worldwide. Its free trade bedrock is frequently accused of being a tool for powerful actors to exploit weaker ones (Mokhiber and Weissman 1999). For example, that heavily subsidised industries from strong countries exploit weaker and infant industries, i.e. the WTO rules force developing countries to open their markets to large multinational corporations with whom developing countries cannot compete. Within agriculture, this is perceived to have catastrophic consequences for rural developing countries (Mokhiber and Weissman 1999). On the matter, Brian Gould has argued: "*The economic arguments in favor of free markets are no more than a fig leaf for this self-serving doctrine of self-aggrandisement.*" (Gould 2008).

Additionally, various consequential effects of the WTO are considered to be widespread. One problematic is connected to the WTO’s overruling power on the national provisions on trade, e.g. within national health regulations or matters of food safety (Shah 2007). According to Global Trade Watch, the US, for example, is using WTO's institutional framework to distribute their genetically modified food produce into countries that have national laws against this type of produce (Wallach 2005, 03.20).

The complexity of the situation seems apparent as the WTO and its neoliberal policies have grown to be so extensive and influential over the years. According to Skidelsky: "*The triumph of the free market, which has dominated the world over the last three decades has been a political triumph.*" (Gould 2008). Hence, one may wonder how this political triumph of the WTO was, in fact, realised despite massive critique. To approach this paradoxical situation, I will initially introduce existing research of the WTO, and in the process position this study.

## 1.4. State-of-the-art research within the WTO

The WTO has been the object for much scrutiny and research over the years. Mainly, the research has revolved around the concept of democracy, i.e. the political system and organisational structures of the WTO, and, furthermore, legal and institutionalised aspects of the WTO; primarily the dispute settlement system (e.g. Shaffer 2001 & Bello 1996). Intensive research has particularly been applied to the WTO within one strand of International Relations [IR], i.e. International Political Economy [IPE] (Baylis 2008, 248).

Large parts of this research have been carried out with background in substantial IR and political theories, i.e. mainly behavioural and systemic theories from a positivist stance. I will, however, distance myself from previous research, and position myself with a social constructivist stance and a focus on social relations and human interaction (for further discussion, see below). This focus is supported by prior research experience within IR, i.e. the conclusion that a sole focus on substantial IR theories and, thus, power in coercive form was inadequate to find knowledge into the many different layers of IR settings.

Hence, one of the ways to find knowledge could be to study discourse as I believe that this approach could provide knowledge and a deeper understanding of the political triumph. Hence, I will introduce discourse studies[[1]](#footnote-1) and thereby specify the approach of this study.

## 1.5. Zooming in on the research focus

Following Chilton and Schäffner: "*Language can be thought of as a resource, which is drawn upon in order for political goals to be achieved*" (Chilton & Schäffner 2002, 23). The term *governmentality* defines a modern form of governance which involves the use of language and discourses as sophisticated power techniques for shaping the behaviour of individuals to reach a specific goal of the governing organ. (Foucault 1977; Rose 1999; Dean 2006) Along these lines, language will be the point of departure for the study.

Language and *discourse*[[2]](#footnote-2) are important for the creation and reproduction of knowledge, social identities and social relations, i.e. language is considered to be *a machine* which constitutes the social world. Therefore, *discourse studies* generally focus on the constituting abilities of language and how it gives meaning to the social world.

However, following Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe 1985, 110), meaning can never be fixated completely due to the instability of language, i.e. there will be a struggle between different discourses with each their way of representing and organising the social reality, thus a *discursive struggle* to gain hegemony (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999, 15). Over time, dominant discourses can be *naturalised*, i.e. the structures of dominance will be obliterated. In this sense, the discourse appears as something objective and natural and not something politically constructed (Laclau 1990, 60).

The constituting abilities of language can be found in several dimensions*:*

*“Through discourse social actors constitute knowledge, situations, social roles as well as identities and interpersonal relations between various interacting social groups. In addition, discursive acts are socially constitutive in a number of ways: First, they play a decisive role in the genesis, production and construction of certain social conditions. Second, they might restore or justify a certain social status quo. Third, they are instrumental in perpetuating and reproducing the status quo.”* (Wodak 2002, 149)

In this sense, discourses may serve to construct certain understandings such as the neoliberal discourse might be serving to construct and reproduce knowledge of the WTO and its social role in international trade relations and in the process produce and construct certain social conditions. Furthermore, the neoliberal discourse might serve to justify the status quo of the neoliberal free trade policies of the WTO and continue to reproduce the status quo despite massive critique.

To summarise, by approaching the study through discourse studies with origin in social constructivism, I aim to contribute new insight which previous research has failed to shed light on. Hence, I aim to enter an under-researched field and thus supplement existing research with my findings.

**Consequently, my main research questions are:**

With departure in discourse studies, how has the political project of the WTO become widely accepted and widespread within international trade?

* How was the neoliberal discourse legitimised and naturalised through the discursive practice of the WTO and by pro-neoliberal media sources supporting the organisation?

Hence, my main focus is to explore how the neoliberal discourse has been naturalised, i.e. constructed as the natural choice, by the WTO itself and also by the different organs which support the organization. Thus, I will focus on the WTO and the media sources used by the WTO to spread their message (for further discussion, see empirical data).

# 2. Methodological considerations

Through a social constructivist understanding, I will assume that the social world is constructed by human activity; the social reality individuals understand and know is created and reproduced in social processes. According to Bryman: *"The social world and its categories are not external to us, but are built up and constituted in and through interaction."* (Bryman 2004, 18).

Knowledge is created in social interaction by social actors, and knowledge is embedded in history and culture, i.e. the way that individuals understand and represent the social world will be a reflection of their historical and cultural context, and, thus, their understanding will be contingent on these relations. Therefore, the social world is socially constructed, and, for that reason, it could have been constructed differently. However, human activity is bound by context, institutionalised, and socially embedded with a certain degree of regularity (Jørgensen and Phillips 1999, 13-14).

Hence, I acknowledge that the neoliberal policies are a social construct, and that the understanding and knowledge of the neoliberal ideology are contingent on its historical context. Therefore, since the neoliberal policies are humanly created and constituted in and through interaction, I will further acknowledge that the continuous prevalence of their hegemony will be contingent on whether or not social actors keep on reproducing their meaning.

By accepting this general premise of social constructivism, I will be able to approach my research questions by dissolving the different layers and elements involved in the human activity and social constructing behind the neoliberal discourse. This will allow me to go into depths with my data, fragment it and explore how it was possible to naturalise this discourse.

# 3. Theoretical foundation

As the main objective of this Ph.D. study is to explore the constituting abilities of language, and, as my focus area calls for a critical approach, I do believe that Critical Discourse Analysis [CDA] will be very relevant. With departure in the constituting abilities of language, I wish to explore how knowledge and power are constituted and also naturalised in social relations, and, therefore, I believe that CDA will provide me with appropriate analytical tools.

## **3.1. Critical discourse analysis [CDA]**

The theoretical field of CDA is a wide field. The work of Ruth Wodak (2002, 2005), Norman Fairclough (1992, 2003) and Paul Chilton (2002, 2004, 2005) are considered influential within CDA. These authors seem promising for my research focus based on their specific work areas, i.e. Wodak and history, Fairclough and media discourse in a political perspective, and Chilton and political discourse and the genre of political speeches. I would, however, like to explore the field further before taking up my final theoretical position.

### 3.1.1. CDA preliminaries

Power and ideology are closely connected to CDA, i.e. the critical perspective focuses on implicit ideological power relations in linguistic and social studies. Hence, CDA aims to explore how certain social groups use language and texts to promote self-interests through implicit and subtle wielding of power (Fairclough 2003, 9).

The key tenet in CDA, which distinguishes it from other discourse studies, is the assumption that discourse is both constituted and constituting. Hence, CDA acknowledges: "*A dialectical relationship between particular discursive events and situations, institutions and social structures in which they are embedded*. *In other words, discourse constitutes social practice and is at the same time constituted by it."* (Wodak 2002, 149).

Hence, discourse plays a part in constructing the social world by shaping social practice, and, conversely, social practices and structures also shape discourses and, thus, how language can be used*.* Therefore, a given discourse forms a dialectical relation to a given social practice, i.e. the social world holds both discursive and non-discursive elements (Fairclough 1992, 64).

Due to the dialectical relation, CDA acknowledges an interdisciplinary focus; a combination of a textual analysis and a social analysis. This is an essential focus as CDA assumes that a textual analysis would not shed light on the links between textual products and their social context. Therefore, CDA operates with two different sets of theories, i.e. linguistic approaches combined with social theories (Fairclough 1992). Hence, I will introduce a social theory approach.

## 3.2. The Social Practice

To approach the social practice, a number of theoretical possibilities exist, but Habermas’ Critical Theory (1984) supplemented with the concept of *Governmentality* [GM] appear to be particularly promising, thus, I will give it further consideration.

### 3.2.1. Strategic use of language

Habermas’ Critical Theory primarily focuses on contemporary capitalism through a critical lens, i.e. critical as one of the main assumptions of this theoretical strand is that individuals’ lives are *colonised* by what Habermas refers to as *systems*. Money, power, the economy, the state and institutions are labelled as systems which are self-beneficial and goal oriented through the use of *strategic discourses*, hence most communication is distorted by the interests of the participants (Habermas 1984).

Furthermore, Habermas’ theory *of communicative action* sees communication as a process of negotiating *validity claims* (Chilton 2002, 181). The claim to *rightness* with focus on claiming legitimacy in political speech acts seems to be particularly interesting in relation to my research question: "*The claim to be normatively "right" to utter what one is uttering, and as claiming the authority to be performing the speech act in hand.*" (Chilton 2004, 43).

### 3.2.2. GM

The concept *GM* was originally coined by Michel Foucault (1977). GM refers to a modern state governance and power; the way the modern state or other sovereign institutions use a subtle and sophisticated power to influence and shape the interests of its citizens (Foucault 1980, 162). The concept is not based on traditional perceptions of power, i.e. a coercive power. Power is seen as productive as it can create knowledge and discourses (Foucault 1978, 94).

GM has been further developed by Nicholas Rose and Mitchell Dean within the sphere of neoliberal societies, i.e. how individuals are governed and are governing themselves through neoliberal governance technologies (1999, 2006). The term *technology* includes both material, social and self-reflective ways of shaping people in accordance with the goals of the political sovereignty, i.e. technologies of power include any institution that shape behaviour or any concept that is considered the *normal* or natural way of doing things (Rose 1999).

Governance in modern societies depends on practices which produce certain forms of truth in objective, positive and scientific discourses (Otto 2003, 4). For that reason, specific governance technologies are often founded in these discourses, which in turn promote specific qualities that individuals will gain by acting accordingly. Hence, human behaviour can be shaped according to these discourses since the governance technologies will shape certain subject positions that individuals will feel interest in possessing since they project *the natural and right choice*. This underlines the essential point in GM; that individuals are governed by subject positions and according to how social practice and discourses are constructed. That way, individuals are governed through self-regulation though according to how *normal or appropriate action* is constructed, i.e. the freedom to act and options are thus also regulated.

### 3.2.3. Aims

Despite massive critique and serious ramifications, the neoliberal policies continue to be accepted. As CDA and GM revolve around subtle governance and sophisticated power techniques for shaping the behaviour of individuals, their theoretical approaches combined with the Habermasian approach could be fruitful in terms of finding answers for my research questions. I believe that this approach could shed light on the mechanisms and elements involved in naturalising the neoliberal discourse, i.e. zoom in on the elements of power in the WTO and its discursive construction on a textual level through CDA. Furthermore, this approach would allow me to contextualise these findings through GM and the Habermasian understanding. This would give further insight into the techniques of subtle power use and governing at a distance in an advanced liberal and cognitive way. Hence, create a critical awareness of the mentioned *freedom to act and options of global actors* which appear to be regulated by the constructors of the neoliberal discourse and, thus, by constructed subject positions.

By approaching my study this way, I will be able to provide insight into how the WTO has been legitimised; how the neoliberal *truth* has been constructed according to neoliberal goals and thus how the WTO has legitimised its subject position through the neoliberal discourse as the main authority to govern international trade.

# **4. Empirical foundation**

## 4.1. Selection of actors

In relation to my research questions, I will explore how the organisation itself and supporting media sources have endorsed their constructed reality. Although, I would like to explore the field further before selecting my final data.

However, I imagine a good place to start would be to focus on the WTO and its own distribution channels and genres, i.e. political speeches by Director-Generals within my timeframe and official WTO documents. Furthermore, I will focus on pro neoliberal media sources as I see a weakness in a sole focus on the WTO, i.e. most commonly large parts of the public will turn to different media genres for international news. Also, most WTO dealings are closed to the public, i.e. most output and news stems from media sources.

In this context, I regard the media as one of the strongest actors in spreading the neoliberal discourse to the public, i.e. a powerful spokesperson for realising a *subtle and ideological power*. Therefore, I see the exploration of these textual products through the lens of CDA and GM as very justifiable.

More specifically, I have delimited my focus to the Economist based on its status and primary readers; I see it as being an opinion leader and internationally acclaimed within the context of the international economy. Additionally, I regard the primary reader group of the Economist as politicians, decision-makers and the business community, i.e. opinion leaders and message carriers in society.

Also, since most information related to the WTO is channelled to the public through either the WTO's own media sources or through pro neoliberal media sources, it would be very interesting to explore the competing discourses and their access to the same trendsetting sources in relation to my research questions if the five-year timeframe allows it.

## 4.2. Timeframe

By accepting a social constructivist approach and its focus on a historical context, I will set the timeframe for this study from 1995, the year the WTO came to life, and up until present state. This way, I will regard the naturalisation as a relatively long process within the timeframe, i.e. an ideology which has been legitimised, reproduced and gained a footing over the years.

## 4.3. Delimitation of data

Moreover, I will make a topic oriented delimitation of my data material. By virtue of the social constructivist approach and my preliminary focus on Wodak's historically oriented CDA, I will focus on data which endorse the neoliberal discourse by making references pertaining to classical economic thinking, i.e. the topics *free trade versus protectionism*, *trade creating growth, prosperity and harmony among nations* combined with a focus on what the neoliberal discourse has coined as positive outcomes and benefits of free trade. I have chosen this topic oriented delimitation based on preliminary research indicating that this focus has been particularly determinant.

## 4.4. The critical perspective

By embodying my particular focus, I will not focus on the actual consumption process. I do see the limitation in this approach, and, if one was to approach this process of acceptance, it would involve interviews and further investigation. However, at present state, I do not see this process as realistic within the timeframe.

# 5. Contribution to scientific development and position in the research programme

By combining social and humanistic studies alike, this study embodies the focus areas and research frames of the Programme. Through this interdisciplinary focus of CDA, the main purpose of the study is to shed light on the links between the discursive practices of the WTO and the social practice. Therefore, the aim is not to analyse what is true and false but to highlight how something can be constructed and accepted as *the truth*. Hence, how power can be productive and implicitly wielded, i.e. gain new perspectives on International Relations and thus challenge the prevailing approaches which primarily focus on power politics and a state level analysis. More specifically, I aim to take a step back and examine the *pre-behavioural* level and explore how ideological effects can be wielded through texts and thus how individuals' interests and options can be shaped and regulated according to specific political goals through discursive constructs.

Hence, I will distance myself from current research by embodying a focus on social relations and human interaction. This way, I aim to contribute to scientific development within the sphere of WTO by making the intangible power use more tangible and visible. Above all, this study could contribute and benefit from sharing information and research findings with for example the C-DiT group.

# 6. Proposed study plan

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| 1st semester, Spring 2013 |
| 1. Formulation of a detailed research plan
2. Further literature review
3. Contact to international research communities within my research area
4. Contact to possible secondary supervisor
5. Participation in workshops, Ph.D. courses and relevant seminars
 |
| Pre-planned Courses |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Course title | Date | Place | Cost | ECTS |
| Basic Course in University Pedagogy | 26 October 2012 9am – 3pm and 2 November 2012 9am – 2pm | Aalborg University | TBA | 2 |
| Challenging Ideas | Monday 29 April 2013 8.30am - Tuesday 30 April 2013 6pm | The Doctoral School of Social Sciences Aalborg University | TBA | 1 |
| PhD seminar: Discourse Theory and Analysis | Tuesday 28. May 2013 9am - Thursday 30 May 2013 4pm | Aalborg University | TBA | TBA |

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| 2nd semester, Autumn 2013 |
| 1. Gathering of relevant literature within Discourse Studies and IR
2. Ph.D. course/already listed.
3. Contact to international research communities within my research area.
4. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
 |
| Pre-planned Courses |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Course title | Date | Place | Cost | ECTS |
| An International Summer School on Discourse, Practice and Social Justice | Monday 19 August 2013 8am - Saturday 24 August 2013 4pm | Culture and Global Studies Aalborg University | 4000 DKK | TBA |
| Network seminar for PhD students: A seminar for PhD students about establishing network - more info will follow | Monday 21. October 2013 9am - Friday 25 October 2013 3pm | Culture and Global Studies Aalborg University | TBA | TBA |

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| 3rd semester, Spring 2014 |
| 1. Reading and gathering of relevant literature with the purpose of selecting relevant data
2. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 4th semester, Autumn 2014 |
| 1. Writing theoretical framework
2. Choosing data
3. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 5th semester, Spring 2015 |
| 1. Writing theoretical framework
2. Choosing data
3. Collection of research data
4. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 6th semester, Autumn 2015 |
| 1. Further collection of data
2. Participation in international conferences
3. Data collection
4. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 7th semester, Spring 2016 |
| 1. Data collection and analysis of research data.
2. Ph.D. course/academic writing/Andrew Fish
3. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 8th semester, Autumn 2016 |
| 1. Writing and finalizing the research
2. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 9th semester, Spring 2017 |
| 1. Writing and finalizing the research
2. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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| 10th semester, Autumn 2017 |
| 1. Review and completion of Ph.D. project
2. Participation at relevant seminars, workshops and courses.
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**Video clip**

Wallach, Lori,*”* [*Free Trade—The Price Paid” (Part Two).* Big Picture TV,](http://www.bigpicture.tv/videos/watch/1d7f7abc1)  13 April 2005

1. The approach to discourses in this study will have its origin in a social constructivist understanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Jørgensen & Phillips discourse refers to a specific way of understanding a social reality and how the social reality is represented through language. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)