

Uncovering Symbolic Power  
Power Analysis, Southern Countries, and the World Trade Organization

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of DPhil in International Relations in the Department of Politics  
and International Relations at the University of Oxford

August 2008  
Word Count: 83,884

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to investigate how one can advance a more critical understanding of power in relation to the World Trade Organization (WTO) by drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. It argues that conventional perspectives on power in the trading regime have tended to contain legalistic and behaviouralist biases that have cut short, or worked against, the development of more critical notions of power and legitimacy. A focus on symbolic power aims to address these deficiencies by analysing those systems of knowledge and rhetorical techniques that are, at one and the same, instruments of communication, political domination and, potentially, resistance. The central question addressed is: how does symbolic power manifest itself in the WTO system? There are three main arguments. First, I argue that while one can see the effects of symbolic power throughout the trading regime, it becomes particularly important at certain moments, most notably in struggles over classifications and at points when certain interests are codified into law. Second, I argue that symbolic power is accumulated and deployed through different mechanisms of legitimation, of which two are analysed in this thesis: framing and mimicry. Third, I argue that symbolic power should be understood as operating in a complex relationship with compulsory power and institutional power in regards to both its internal properties and external dynamics. The objective of the thesis is therefore not to arrive at a single master category or theory of power, but to open analysts of the WTO to a more rigorous and, at the same time, flexible interrogation of this core concept. In terms of the empirical application of these conceptual ideas, I examine two Southern-led coalitions in agriculture that have emerged during the Doha Round. The first centres on a group of African countries that campaigned for the reform of the international cotton regime, while the second addresses a larger coalition that has attempted to rethink food security and rural development concerns. The thesis concludes with a summary of the research findings.