Rethinking the role of NGOs in global governance

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Though all too often contemporary International Relations (IR) theory is state-centric, non-state actors – with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) being the most prominent among them – have long been recognized as important elements of global politics. Across the range of theoretical traditions, non-state actors are afforded a role, though generally one that is secondary to that of states.

It is in social constructivism that NGOs are given the strongest and most clearly defined impact on global politics. Key contributions have highlighted NGOs as early promoters of new norms, agenda setters and democratic difference makers (eg. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) (though by most recent estimations NGOs have had quite limited effect to this end (Hannah 2015; Drezner 2007)). Our argument is that NGOs are often not driving normative change from the bottom up, as is assumed in most treatment of NGOs in international politics. Rather, they are operating as agents of governance – sometimes status quo preserving, sometimes status quo altering, but fundamental (as opposed to peripheral or secondary) to the operation of global governance.

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The authors would like to acknowledge support for this and related research from the British Academy and from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
As such, we argue that for all the work on NGOs and the valuable insights derived from these various traditions, scholarly work has not captured the full involvement of NGOs in global politics. In particular, it does not sufficiently reflect the intimate interconnectedness between NGOs and other actors, particularly intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), which often operate in an almost symbiotic relationship together. NGOs are generally seen as operating on IGOs and states, as pressure groups, lobbyists for policy and normative change and providers of analysis and expertise (particularly to developing countries), often channeling the views of the ‘grassroots’ upwards to higher level actors (however problematic this conceptualization may be).

While all of this remains valid – we are not seeking to overthrow this established knowledge – on its own it risks misconstruing (and indeed downplaying) the full role and centrality of NGOs in global governance. We argue that NGOs are at times found to operate interdependently with the core organizations of global governance, such that the roles played by each become enmeshed to the point at which they are almost analytically inseparable. To illustrate this phenomenon we explore the case of the WTO.

In making this claim, we also argue that this case supports the contention made by Weiss and Wilkinson (2014) that the nature of global governance suggests an analytical move away from traditional theorizing toward starting with the question ‘how is x governed?’. Such an approach comes without presuppositions about the actors involved in a particular situation, nor with the expected roles that they play or their normative motivations. It facilitates a more open engagement with who acts and how.

This research draws on a number of interviews with key people in the WTO and in various NGOs and IGOs that work on trade issues, supplemented by participant observation of a number of key events at which the WTO interacts with NGOs - Public Forums,
Ministerial Conferences and WTO regional outreach events. [This empirical work is yet to be completed, and this paper is therefore a first draft only].

We proceed by first taking stock of the expansive literature on the role of NGOs in global governance and then by conducting a detailed analysis of the evolving relationship between NGOs and the WTO. By examining the democratic, normative and transformative dimensions of NGO agency in global governance, and global trade governance specifically, we aim to showcase the tremendous insights that have been made over the past twenty-five years. These advances notwithstanding, we have only a partial understanding of the relationship between NGOs and IGOs. This is owing, in large part, to ontological blinders that cast NGOs as voices for the voiceless acting upon (rather than from within) global trade governance. The tendency to ‘plug and play’ particular theoretical assumptions about the role of NGOs obscures their centrality in the multilateral trading system. A closer examination and a different standpoint reveal that NGOs are often part of the fabric of global trade governance. In conclusion, we call for a more adaptable approach that can better account for the dynamic role of NGOs in global governance.

**What IR Theory Says About NGOs and Global (Trade) Governance**

As international institutions increasingly govern global social goods and regulate contemporary society, NGOs have focused their attention beyond the state and successfully positioned themselves as necessary participants in global governance. The growing scale and intensity of NGO participation in global governance has captured the attention of IR scholars for at least two decades now.⁵ Even realists recognize that NGOs have a role to play, albeit a small one. Indeed, though neo-realism affords little scope to non-state actors (Mearsheimer

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⁵ For an historical account of international NGOs, dating from the French Revolution to the present, see Davies 2014. For a contemporary overview of the role of NGOs in global governance see Willetts 2011 and Scholte 2011.
1994) they are less devalued in other strands of realism (see Schweller and Priess 1997 on realist understandings of international institutions). Not just IGOs, but NGOs and civil society also find a place in more nuanced realist frameworks. For example, Robert Gilpin recognizes NGOs as playing an important, albeit secondary, role in international politics (Gilpin 2001: 393-400), while the classical realism of early scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and E H Carr also afforded more room to non-state actors than is usually recognized (Molloy 2006: 25-32). However, realists also emphasize the continued centrality of the state in global governance and question the novelty and significance of NGOs for affecting outcomes in world politics. At most, NGOs are conceived by realists as interest groups whose success or failure in affecting policy change is simply a reflection of state-based power politics. At least, NGOs are epiphenomenal in world politics.

These skeptics notwithstanding, most IR scholars of all theoretical stripes recognize the centrality and importance of NGOs in global governance (Lipschutz 1992, Boli & George 1999, Florini 2000, Wapner 1995, Gordenker and Weiss 1996, Reimann 2006). Three questions regarding NGO agency are prevalent in the literature. First, does the involvement of NGOs improve the democratic quality of global governance? NGOs are widely thought to represent global citizens’ demands, constitute a basic form of popular representation, and to hold decision-makers to account, especially through “naming and shaming” tactics (Archibugi 2001, Archibugi and Held 2011, Bexell, Tahlberg and Uhlin 2010). Second, what role do NGOs play in generating and disseminating norms and affecting substantive, policy change in global governance? And third, scholars from a range of theoretical vantage points also explore the conditions under which NGOs are able to resist and disrupt global governance (Gill 2008), and its underlying power and knowledge dynamics (Bernstein and Adler 2005). These questions have all been applied to NGO interaction with the multilateral
trade system. While this body of scholarship has greatly improved our understanding of
global (trade) governance, it suffers from disciplinary blindness and therefore misses
important dynamics at play, to which we turn in section three.

a. NGOs, Democracy and Legitimacy (*liberal cosmopolitan*)

NGOs are widely thought to represent global citizens’ needs and concerns in global
governance. For cosmopolitan liberals, the interaction between NGOs and international
institutions is seen in a positive light, with the expectation that this will help overcome the
democratic deficit seen in global governance and produce more participatory, accountable,
and transparent decision-making (Steffek, Kissling and Nanz 2008, Erman and Uhlin 2010,
Tallberg and Uhlin 2011, Archibugi and Held 2011). Indeed, for Jan Aart Scholte (2007, 305)
– the leading cosmopolitan authority on civil society and global governance – NGO
“involvement could inject values and voice that bolster the moral and democratic legitimacy
of global governance.”^4

In this vein, there are five key ways through which NGOs may improve the quality of
global governance. First, they may educate the public by disseminating information and
generating awareness about important issues. Second, NGOs may enhance the quality and
possibility of global public debate through securing or enhancing additional spaces for
informed citizens to engage with or contest policies. Third, NGOs may give voice and
recognition to otherwise marginalized groups that have been silenced by policymaking
beyond the state and/or by arbitrary social hierarchies. Fourth, policymaking beyond they
state may become more transparent and open to public scrutiny as NGOs participate in
policymaking, push for access to documents and monitor and assess impact of new policies.
Finally, NGOs may improve the accountability of global governance by playing a watchdog

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^4 See also Scholte 2004.
function, improving the public accountability and responsiveness of decision-makers by publicizing grievances or naming and shaming in the media (Hannah 2015).

The role of NGOs in global economic governance, and the WTO in particular, has been the focus of much scholarly attention since the so-called ‘Battle of Seattle’ in 1999. Widely considered to be the coming out moment of the anti-globalization movement, citizens took to the streets to denounce a global economic system that was seen to be exclusionary and unfair, and producing profound inequalities, environmental destruction and social dislocations worldwide (Gill 2000; Halliday 2000; Wilkinson 2006). At the heart of the matter was the extension of trade rules beyond goods to ostensibly non-trade issues (such as health, environment and food safety) and beyond barriers to trade ‘at the border’ to regulatory regimes that had heretofore been the exclusive domain of national authorities. In an effort to stem off its legitimacy crisis, the WTO increased its engagement with NGOs. It is widely argued by scholars, WTO officials, NGOs and national delegates alike that more open trade policymaking processes that include NGOs will, by virtue of the divergence of interests represented, lead to a more democratically legitimate international trade system (Ostry 2001, Charnovitz 2004, Williams 2011).

In response, a burgeoning body of literature assesses whether the growing involvement of NGOs at the WTO improves the institutions’ democratic legitimacy (Esty 1998; Wilkinson 2005; Murphy 2012; Steffek 2012; O’Brien, Goertz, Scholte and Williams 2000). The impact of NGOs on the WTO’s accountability regime has also received attention (Hannah 2014). Farther afield, scholars question whether NGOs give voice to poor and marginalized countries in international trade negotiations (Hannah 2015, Trommer 2013). These studies share the view that NGO interaction with the WTO makes international trade
negotiations more transparent, gives rise to public debate and contestation, and provides a voice for broader societal concerns about the impact of international trade rules.

b. NGOs, Ideas, Norms and Policy Change (liberal, rationalist-constructivist)

The impact of NGO advocacy on global governance dominates the scholarly literature. Liberals and constructivists seek to identify the conditions under which NGOs set the agenda and bring about shifts in ideas, policies and priorities. NGOs are increasingly viewed as integral parts of international institutions. For example, NGOs are conceived by Weiss et al. (2009: 123, 128-129) as part of the “Third” United Nations, an autonomous group of “outsider-insiders” who play an essential role in:

- Providing a forum for debate; generating ideas and policies; legitimating ideas and policies; advocating for ideas and policies; implementing or testing ideas and policies in the field; generating resources to pursue ideas and policies; monitoring progress in the march of ideas and the implementation of policies; and occasionally burying ideas and policies.⁵

In an effort to better understand the role of NGOs in international institutions and their influence over foreign policy and international agreements, liberals have attempted to model the behavior and impact of NGOs after more traditional, instrumentally motivated interest groups (e.g. Bloodgood 2011). By contrast, constructivists conceive of NGOs as norm entrepreneurs seeking social and moral change. In the early literature, scholars tended to study how norm dissemination at the international level motivates change in the domestic arena by way of the ‘boomerang effect’ or the ‘spiral model’ (Keck and Sikkink 1998). And the establishment, dissemination and enforcement of global norms (Clark 2001, Keck and Sikkink 1998, Klotz 1995), in the areas of human rights (Risse-Kappen, Ropp and Sikkink 1999), environment (Corell and Betsill 2001), landmines (Price 1998), and women’s rights (Clark, Friedman and Hochstetler 1998) amongst many others, has been the subject of

⁵ The formal role of NGOs in the UN system has also received extensive treatment elsewhere eg. Reimann 2006.
extensive inquiry. More recently, attention has turned to NGO agenda setting, examining how and why advocacy networks select some issues for attention and not others, and to what effect (Carpenter et al; Wong 2012). The common denominator in these studies is the view that NGOs affect policy outcomes by establishing and strengthening global norms to the point that even great powers cannot ignore them.

There is a burgeoning literature on the role of transnational NGO advocacy and normative agenda-setting in global trade (see for eg. Wilkinson 2005; Murphy 2010; Williams 2011). Much attention has been focused on the public campaigns waged by NGOs at the WTO. Some scholars evaluate the impact of formal NGO inclusion vis-à-vis the submission of amicus curiae briefs to the dispute settlement process and NGO participation in WTO proceedings, public symposia and consultations with the WTO secretariat (Van den Bossche 2008; Piewitt 2010). Others examine the informal agenda-setting capacity of NGOs at the WTO in a range of issue areas such as trade and health (Sell and Prakash 2004; Matthews 2006;), environment (Esty 1998), investment (Smythe 2003), labour standards (O’Brien et. al 2000); intellectual property rights and public health (Hannah 2011); and development (Wilkinson 2005). The potential for NGOs to facilitate the construction of global social contracts between global citizens and the WTO has also received some attention (He and Murphy 2007).

c. NGOs, Power, Knowledge and Resistance (critical constructivist, post structuralist, neo-gramscian)

Critical scholars dig deeper than liberal and rationalist-constructivist scholars to unpack the knowledge and subjectivities that enable and constrain NGO agency in global governance. John Ruggie (1975) introduced the episteme concept to international relations (IR), since

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6 The literature on the international impact of NGO advocacy is too expansive to list.
which the ‘epistemic communities’ literature has generated a small cottage industry focused on the epistemic dimension of global governance (Haas 1992; Finnemore 1993, 1996; Ruggie 1982, 1993; Adler 1992, 1998). Drawing from Foucault (1970), contemporary critical scholars conceive of epistemes as constituting the deepest level of the ideational world and endowing some with the authority to determine valid knowledge or to reproduce the knowledge on which an episteme is based (Adler and Bernstein 2005). Epistemes serve a gate-keeping function in global governance. They are comprised of shared, intersubjective or taken-for-granted causal and evaluative assumptions about how the world works they contain ‘background knowledge’ or boundaries within which people reason and make choices. Essentially, epistemes discipline which actions and practices are conceivable and which are unimaginable.

There is a small but growing body of scholarship that examines the interplay between knowledge and power and the conditions under which NGOs may generate or challenge the epistemic foundations of global governance. For example Susan Strange (1994) long ago identified knowledge as one of four aspects of power in the international system. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005) offer a compelling analytical framework for examining NGO agency by employing the concept of ‘productive power’, which they define as the social powers that actors may enjoy “through systems of knowledge and discursive practices of broad and general social scope” (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 20). Post-structuralists have sought to critically unpack the role of NGOs in ‘global governmentality’ and to challenge conventional understandings of NGOs as agents of transformation and resistance (Amoore and Langley 2004; Jaeger 2007; Sending and Neumann 2006). More detailed examinations of how these aspects of power play out in global trade governance are few but notable (Hannah, Scott and Trommer 2015).
Wilkinson (2009), Siles-Brügge (2013) and Trommer (2015) consider the structural power of language in upholding trade experts’ monopoly over knowledge. Others examine how economic and legal knowledge plays a gatekeeping function in global trade (Conti 2010; Lang 2013; George 2010). With respect to NGOs specifically, Hannah (2015) explores how NGO agency is constrained by the legal/liberal episteme in global trade. Eagleton-Pierce (2013) uses the work of Bourdieu to examine ‘symbolic power’ in the global trade system, emphasising how social and political orders are legitimated through particular discourses that draw from expertise as means of legitimation. In particular, Eagleton-Pierce explores the struggle between orthodox and heterodox views on trade policy and the role of ‘conventional wisdom’ in maintaining support for the orthodoxy. Tucker (2014) and Strange (2013) use post-structuralist methodology to examine how changing discursive and social contexts at the WTO and forms of interaction between NGOs and WTO staff and national delegates produce and reinforce patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and ideas about appropriate subjects of dialogue. All of these studies are concerned with the conditions under which NGOs may resist and alter the prevailing knowledge—power dynamics in global trade.

The production and reproduction of knowledge has also played an important role in Neo-Gramscian work which has important insights to bear on role of NGOs in global governance. Following Antonio Gramsci, the focus of the existing literature in this area has frequently been on how ideas and the intellectuals that propagate them solidify hegemonic orders or construct counter-hegemonic challenges. Central to this literature has been the construction of what Robert Cox has termed collective images of social order – that is, ‘differing views as to both the nature and the legitimacy of prevailing power relations, the meaning of justice and public good, and so forth’ (Cox 1996: 99). These collective images invariably privilege some interests over others and are supported and intellectually justified.
by a range of civil society organizations. Thus knowledge production is inherently bound up with identity and interests (Gill 1993: 24). NGOs in such analyses play a central role in resisting the neo-liberal order (Mittelman 2000; Gill 1993; Gills 1997), though where they engage with international organizations such as the WTO (cite), a process of transformismo is often identified (cite). This is a process in which critical voices are progressively blunted by the assimilation of their language into official discourse, giving the appearance of shared aims and analyses between the organization and the critical NGO (e.g. Paterson 2009).

As this literature review shows, much has been written concerning the role of NGOs in international politics from a variety of perspectives, some expecting positive impacts and others more sanguine. Throughout, NGOs are seen almost exclusively as a set of actors that achieves impact principally by operating on other actors, particularly states and international organizations. Much of the literature highlights the role played by NGOs in resisting the dominant neo-liberal order, though there is considerable variance across the literature in how successful this is considered to be depending primarily on the theoretical tradition adopted.

**WTO and civil society nexus**

The impact of non-state actors on the WTO was clear from the moment of its creation in 1995, but originally this centered on the role played by transnational corporations and business groups in pushing and indeed drafting certain WTO agreements, particularly TRIPS (Sell 2001) and GATS (REFERENCE). The involvement of NGOs and other such civil society actors is generally traced to the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’ at the WTO’s 3rd Ministerial Conference, at which a broad ‘anti-globalization’ movement outside the Ministerial contributed to bringing the Ministerial to a collapse and prevented the launching of a

The confrontation between civil society and the WTO had not been predicted and led to some difficult soul-searching within the WTO secretariat who saw the still nascent organization suddenly thrown into the center of a storm. Different members of the secretariat favored different means of dealing with the issue, but it was decided that the WTO needed to develop some form of engagement with civil society. The principal means of doing this was through inaugurating the WTO Public Symposium in 2001 (renamed the Public Forum in 2006) as an annual means of bringing NGOs to Geneva in order to open a dialogue between the Organization and its critics. This was conceived as a means of each learning about the other – for the WTO to learn about the criticisms that civil society was making of the Organization, and for those NGOs to learn more about what the WTO is and what it does. In this regard, it was explicitly designed by the WTO as a rather hastily convened means of countering the negative narratives around trade being propounded by NGOs.7 As the Symposium/Forum has expanded over time and as the spotlight of civil society activity has increasingly moved on from the WTO, this ‘fire-fighting’ dynamic has been lost and the Forum has become much less about neutralizing criticism and more about public discussion of trade matters. Indeed, the Forum is now often aimed more towards business groups than the set of NGOs that stimulated its creation.

The second regular forum for civil society to engage with the WTO is the bi-annual Ministerial Conferences, which have continued to attract protests and disturbances, albeit with diminishing numbers and fervor over time (see Wilkinson, Hannah and Scott 2014). While once these attracted the whole gamut of ‘anti-globalization’, environmental and

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7 Interview with a member of the WTO Secretariat, 2014.
development organizations (as seen so dramatically at Seattle), as the Doha Round drifted towards stasis many NGOs saw the considerable expense of travelling to these events to be poor ways of spending their limited resources. While protests continue to be a ritualized feature of Ministerials, increasingly the protestors are all but outnumbered by the media. Civil society action with regard to the WTO has been driven by particular campaigning focal points. These include the Seattle Ministerial where the focus was opposing the launching of a new round of negotiations, and the high profile campaign mobilized around the threat to South Africa’s HIV/AIDS drugs program by US pressure over TRIPs (Shadlen 2004; Abbott 2002). However, other more niche areas have also seen coalitions of NGOs seeking to influence the direction of WTO policy, including over GATS and the inclusion of water services in liberalization commitments, the treatment of genetically modified foods within WTO law, and many more.

However, while all this is well known and all fits with standard views about the interaction between NGOs and the organizations of global governance, the nexus between the WTO and civil society holds another, deeper layer that is largely unexplored but which is crucial to understand if we are to develop a full picture of how civil society has engaged with the WTO. This concerns the way in which the WTO, almost from its creation, has worked very closely with certain NGOs in a joint, mutual program of capacity building and outreach. Two such organizations are examined here.

First, the WTO has been in a long term partnership with the German NGO Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in a program of outreach and training to civil society primarily within the developing world but also in key other regions, such as Eastern Europe. This has provided

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8 See http://www.gatswatch.org.
resources for the WTO’s external relations department to hold training events jointly with FES both in Geneva and around the developing world. These sessions are designed for NGOs and media organizations as a means of providing information on what the WTO does, where the negotiations stand and how the trade system functions. For example, in April 2014 one such event was held in Geneva concerning ‘Challenges and Potentials for Post-Soviet Countries’ as these countries joined the WTO (FES 2014a). More regular meetings have been held in a similar vein, the most recent being the East Africa and Multilateral Trade Regional Dialogue, held in Nairobi in November 2014, which aimed at enabling participants ‘to better understand the WTO and its role in the international trading system’ through providing ‘a platform for in-depth and critical discussion of the multilateral trading regime and its consequences for development in East Africa’ (FES 2014b).

This event was the latest in a regular series of such meetings that have been undertaken with a view both to increasing the capacity of civil society in developing countries and encouraging them to engage with WTO matters. These started early on following the WTO’s creation and have been organized on a regional basis to access as many developing countries as possible, with recent such dialogues being held in Jakarta (2013), Egypt (2009), while other years see events in Geneva targeted at journalists from Sub-Saharan Africa (2012) or Latin America (2011).\textsuperscript{10} The aim of this joint program of events is to provide both an introduction to what the WTO is about and many of the sessions are led by secretariat members with this objective, but a platform is also given for more critical voices to comment.\textsuperscript{11}

A similar program of capacity building events is held by the legal IGO Advisory Council for WTO Law (ACWL), which was established in 2001 in response to the perception

\textsuperscript{10} For details, see the FES events archive at www.fes-globalization.org/geneva/events_archive.htm.

\textsuperscript{11} Based on observation by authors of Nairobi 2014 regional dialogue.
that developing countries could not use the Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM) due to its complexity and their lack of technical capacity. Funded primarily by the bigger developing country members and the ‘usual’ donors – the Nordic countries, UK, Canada, etc. but excluding the EU and US – ACWL provides support across a range of areas of WTO law under three broad headings.\footnote{For a list of members see ACWL (2013).} First, it provides assistance to developing countries (at a subsidized rate for most and free for LDCs) when using the DSM; second it provides legal advice, for instance in crafting new legislation and ensuring that it is WTO compliant; and third it works with the WTO and certain NGOs, particularly ICTSD, in training and outreach for developing countries.

This third element is of most interest for present purposes. This is similar to the events run by FES and the WTO examined above. ACWL holds regular twice-yearly regional training workshops run jointly with the WTO and the NGO the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD), spread around the developing world. In 2013, for instance, these covered ‘Managing and Avoiding Trade Disputes’ in Brasilia in October and ‘Anti-Dumping Investigating Authorities’ in Beijing in November (ACWL 2013: 38). These are aimed at increasing the technical capacity of developing countries in understanding WTO law and use of the DSM, in an attempt to begin overcoming the deficit in technical capacity that developing countries face compared to the rich countries.

Crucially, the training that these joint exercises provide is different to that which the WTO can give on its own (Smeets 2013). Secretariat staff are required by their position to maintain neutrality. They are able to do little more than explain the WTO rules but cannot give any significant analysis of those rules, since to do so would almost certainly be incompatible with maintaining political neutrality. To critics, this constraint renders WTO
training almost useless as it means that the training developing countries receive deliberately
fails to tell them precisely the most important aspect of such policy-related training – that is,
what policies their country should actually pursue. Partnering with other organizations
opens a greater space for these training events to engage beyond mere explanation of the rules
and deal more substantively with the politics around the issues.

Jointly, these programs illustrate a close enmeshment between NGOs and IGOs
working in tandem. The NGOs involved are not performing the role that is ascribed to them
in the theories examined above. Specifically, these are not cases of pressure being applied by
NGOs to bring about normative change in the way in which the WTO governs trade. No
effort is being made to pressure the WTO or the member states to conform to a particular
view of how trade should be governed – that is, to effect policy or normative change. While
NGO engagement with the WTO in the Ministerial Meetings is often primarily of this nature,
the examples explored here are of NGOs working closely with IGOs in core aspects of the
work of governance. Though each of the organizations explored above has core sets of values
to which it ascribes and which determine the work that it does, they are not seeking to impose
these worldviews on others in the way in which more traditional advocacy organizations
operate.

Rather, what we see is NGOs and IGOs working as one to ensure that global
governance operates effectively and is better understood. Such outreach programs form an
important aspect of the functioning of the WTO but they could not happen without this
collaboration with the NGO sector, both for financial reasons and due to the strict necessity
for impartiality in how the Secretariat operates.

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13 This sentiment was put strongly to the authors in an interview with a senior World Bank official.
In one sense the operations explored here are drivers of preserving the status quo – making the WTO more secure through bringing other actors more firmly into the system. They are a means of ensuring that more marginalized groups are educated about how the WTO functions about the foundational theories and logic of the system. Inevitably, this has an element of blunting criticism and disseminating a WTO-supported understanding of the world to the targeted audiences – in this case, media, other NGOs and developing country governments. At the same time, however, this does not fully capture the dynamic of the engagement.

For present purposes, the key lesson is the close enmeshment of NGOs and IGOs in joint governance activities, belying the usual separation of the two. Rather than IGOs being pressured by NGOs in resistance to particular agendas, or IGOs seeking to draw in and neutralize the criticisms of civil society, or any of the other modes of interaction that we would derive from core theoretical traditions, what we have is an enmeshed, joint system of governance in which the actors involved are barely separable.

This suggests the need for stepping back in how we approach understanding global governance. All too often scholarly endeavor reconfirms what it expects to find, with those expectations derived from the set of theoretical traditions that have become entrenched over the years. A more fruitful approach may be to step back from our theoretical lenses and ask, as Tom Weiss and Rorden Wilkinson (2014) set out, ‘how is X governed?’ This should not entail abandoning theory, but it is a means of avoiding a rather drab reconfirmation exercise of the role played by NGOs in global politics.

Conclusion
The WTO is a member (that is, state) driven organisation, but both NGOs and IGOs are deeply enmeshed with how that functions in reality. They perform roles in originating ideas; developing and analysing the consequences and options flowing from those ideas; creating pressure in favour or opposition to certain ideas; ‘democratising’ governance through education, deliberation, public scrutiny and ‘naming and shaming’. This paper has sought to challenge conventional wisdom about NGO agency in global governance. We are not seeking to overturn existing scholarship, but to highlight the disciplinary blindness that is generated by approaching the study of international politics from within theoretical silos. Too much of the time, scholarly work, or perhaps scholars, are predisposed to see NGOs as behaving in a certain way and there is a tendency to equate high levels of NGO activity with causal effect in global governance. Even the range of more critical perspectives sees NGO activity as primarily tied with opposition to global governance and its neo-liberal elements.

Through our participant observation and interviews with key people we have observed different phenomena at play. Notably, what we see cannot be accommodated sufficiently within the theories examined in section two. In this sense, we argue that to understand how global governance functions requires us to start from a different standpoint and a loosening of the strictures of theory. This reinforces the contention made by Weiss and Wilkinson (2014) that global governance as a field of study is not well served by the set of theoretical traditions that we currently have. They call for an alternative approach to overcome the ‘poorly understood’ nature of global governance identified by Craig Murphy (2001), that starts from a more empirically driven position and asks how particular areas are governed, without preconceived notions of what actors are involved and what roles they play.
This is not to say that we should, or even can, seek to understand the world without theory. Rather, we need to step back from the existing theoretical silos and take a fresh look at how the constantly changing world of global governance actually operates, rather than seeking to (re)confirm our assumptions about how the world hangs together.
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