



Book Review

Shadow Negotiators: How UN Organizations Shape the Rules of World Trade for Food Security

by Matias Margulis

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Matias Margulis's 2023 book, *Shadow Negotiators: How UN Organizations Shape the Rules of World Trade for Food Security*, makes the case that international organizations (IOs) have been far from passive bystanders in the global governance of food and agriculture at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The WTO, Margulis notes, makes rules that can "constrain the policy space available for states to intervene in food and agriculture markets"—rules that have significant consequences for world food security (p. 2). WTO authority has expanded rapidly, but through four empirical chapters, Margulis shows that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (SRRTF) have each inserted themselves into multilateral trade negotiations, deploying a range of strategies that have steered global rule-making in alignment with their social purpose, toward outcomes that protect the world's most vulnerable.

Margulis's background as a former Canadian WTO representative gives the book an insider's lens, yet the theoretical contributions are significant. Margulis effectively corrects the largely unquestioned assumptions in International Relations (IR) that UN organizations don't matter in trade rulemaking, and that they may only act in their own institutional authority space. This book therefore rewrites the dominant authority ascribed to the WTO, by showing how IOs have used different forms of intervention to assert their own mandates in the global food system.

Shadow Negotiators is laid out in eight main chapters, including introduction and conclusion. The first chapters explain the theoretical contribution of the book, including the four forms of intervention. Chapters 3 to 6 focus on the empirical cases that detail and provide evidence of the interventions of the four different IOs at the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs Trade)/WTO and in the global trade regime in general, through different multilateral trade negotiations. Chapter 3 outlines the context of

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FAO organizational culture and shows how FAO officials intervened in both the GATT Uruguay Round and the WTO Doha Round, out of concern that proposed trade rules would result in higher prices and less accessible food for the world's poor. Chapter 4 shows how the WFP publicly shamed WTO members as a way to block trade rules that could negatively impact international food aid. Chapter 5 focusses on the OHCHR, and its use of international human rights laws to protect the world's most vulnerable from the potentially adverse effects of agricultural trade liberalization. Chapter 6 is the final IO case, examining the way the SRRTF endorsed a bargaining position of some WTO members. Once again, the SRRTF intervened because of concerns around the impacts new global agricultural trade rules could have on rising food insecurity. Aiming to shift the trajectory of trade negotiations, IOs become *shadow negotiators* in the regime itself, especially as they make concrete interventions such as drafting bargaining proposals, steering negotiations agendas, blocking proposals, and mobilizing coalitions of like-minded states.

While Margulis's cases are richly detailed and extremely well researched, I will pay particular attention to the initial chapters detailing the theoretical contribution. Margulis writes in an exceptionally clear fashion, laying out four forms of IO intervention that add up to the designation of shadow negotiations employed by UN organizations. These are: mobilizing states, public shaming, invoking alternative legal frameworks, and taking sides. Importantly, Margulis argues that IOs have developed these strategies because they have no authority over what happens in other parts of a regime complex. One question the book leaves partially open is how IOs come to know when to intervene in the first place—that is, how secretariats monitor decision-making at overlapping organizations well enough to anticipate harmful outcomes. Margulis identifies access to information as a precondition for intervention, but the mechanics of that surveillance across institutional boundaries remain unexplored. The book makes a major contribution to food governance and global governance more generally, offering a nuanced way to think about IO intervention. It will therefore be of use to food studies scholars interested in global rule-making,

as well as IR and global governance scholars. Chapter 2 deserves special mention as a succinct account of the evolution of global food governance, making it particularly useful for teaching. Careful attention to organizational culture and individual leadership enriches the cases considerably and will help readers new to global governance of food better understand the regime complex. The insider's texture surfaces throughout—for example, in connecting for the reader that the EU quietly blocked the WFP Executive Director's reappointment in retaliation for his Hong Kong Ministerial advertisement.

Shadow Negotiators sits alongside the growing body of food governance scholarship relevant for CFS readers—from Clapp's work on financialization and corporate power to McKeon and Duncan's analyses of the Committee for World Food Security (CFS), FAO and civil society—but carves out a distinct contribution by focussing on how IOs protect their social purpose by influencing beyond their mandates. Where much of that literature centres on who dominates global food rule-making, Margulis shows how some contest it.

Shadow Negotiators corrects some long-held assumptions in IR but also contributes significantly to our understanding of the behaviour of IOs in regime complexes. By uncovering IO intervention strategies at the WTO, Matias Margulis has shown that IOs are both aware of possible incursions into their own mandate space and view this as reason to intervene, even where they have not been delegated formal authority. These newly recognized behaviours are especially important as we move into uncertain times in world trade, with volatile tariffs and food prices.

Lucy Hinton is an Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations at King's University College at Western University. Her research draws on critical international political economy and development theory to examine corporate and neocolonial influence in global food governance, with a particular focus on CARICOM states. Lucy approaches this work as a white settler scholar based in Canada, mindful of power relations embedded in researching postcolonial food systems. Her scholarship is oriented toward reparative approaches to power in global food governance, and she works closely with community partners and research participants to ground this commitment in practice.

Conflicts of Interest: None to declare.