


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The cultural foundations of trade policy: Competitive free trade and the UK–Australia free trade agreement

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Abstract

This article examines United Kingdom (UK) parliamentary debates on the adoption of its first post-Brexit, from-scratch free trade agreement (FTA), with Australia. Building on Jessop's cultural political economy framework, we identify and analyse the economic imaginaries animating UK post-Brexit trade policy debates at this time. We find that an imaginary of what we term 'competitive free trade' shaped the UK Government's approach to the UK–Australia FTA. Meanwhile, the Opposition, much of the House of Lords, and a small number of Conservative Members of Parliament endorsed an alternative 'embedded free trade' imaginary. Our analysis suggests that the UK government successfully used the context of an unsettled domestic institutional environment for trade policy post-Brexit in order to negotiate and ratify an FTA with Australia that reflected its competitive free trade imaginary. The article offers an account of UK post-Brexit trade policy that highlights how material, political, and ideational dimensions co-constitute each other in the political economy of trade, and how particular economic imaginaries become reified and dominant at certain junctures.

Keywords: Australia; Brexit; cultural political economy; trade; UK

Introduction

Trade debates aroused passions in the United Kingdom (UK) in the context of its exit from the European Union (EU).¹ At the time, an emerging scholarly field on UK post-Brexit trade policy doubted whether the UK government held the expertise and capacity required to develop an independent trade policy in the context of contemporary trade governance uncertainties.² As the UK government utilised its restored commercial policy autonomy through securing continued World Trade Organization (WTO) membership and signing a range of free trade agreements (FTAs), scholars began studying the shape and content of the UK's post-Brexit trade policy choices, often diagnosing an apparent lack of direction. They highlighted either economic and political

¹Franco Zappettini, 'The Brexit referendum: How trade and immigration in the discourses of the official campaigns have legitimised a toxic (inter)national logic', in Franco Zappettini and Michał Krzyżanowski (eds), *'Brexit' as a Social and Political Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 23–39.

²Holger Hestermeyer and Federico Ortino, 'Towards a UK trade policy post-Brexit: The beginning of a complex journey', *King's Law Journal*, 27:3 (2016), pp. 452–62; Silke Trommer, 'Post-Brexit trade policy autonomy as pyrrhic victory: Being a middle power in a contested trade regime', *Globalizations*, 14:6 (2017), pp. 810–19.

incentives³ or emotional and performative dynamics in their explorations of UK post-Brexit trade policy.⁴

Analysing UK parliamentary debates on the UK's first post-Brexit, from-scratch FTA with Australia, we intervene in these debates by deploying a cultural political economy approach. We explore UK intergovernmental conflicts over trade but expand the analysis beyond the executive branch of government. Theoretically, our cultural political economy account recognises the importance of the emotional, performative, political, and material factors in the political economy of post-Brexit UK trade policy that the extant literature has identified. However, as discussed below, cultural political economy emphasises that these elements are co-constitutive in political economy and studies how political actors selectively assemble and deploy them in economic policymaking. Rather than assuming the absence of a long-term vision on UK post-Brexit trade, our cultural political economy approach allows us to identify specific visions, or what Bob Jessop calls 'economic imaginaries', that guide economic policymakers.

Our cultural political economy analysis suggests that the UK–Australia FTA constituted one step in an ongoing contestation between two distinct visions for UK trade policymaking among the British political elite, which we call 'competitive free trade' and 'embedded free trade' respectively. Based on the UK parliamentary debates that we analysed, we argue that the UK–Australia agreement came to pass when extraordinarily empowered actors, enacting a competitive free trade economic imaginary, used the historically unique configuration of the UK's first post-Brexit FTA in order to negotiate internationally and ratify domestically an FTA that advanced their competitive vision for UK economy and society.

In our cultural political economy framework, 'culture' is not understood to refer to a set of attributes or characteristics displayed by a distinct group, but as an ongoing and contested process of meaning making, or 'semiotic practice', through which people individually and collectively make sense of, and enact, the world.⁵ Economic imaginaries constitute our central conceptual and analytical tool. As we explore below, economic imaginaries are semiotic systems that mediate ideational, political, and economic dimensions of how the social world is produced and reproduced. The mediation occurs through selective discourses (speech acts) and selective notions of agency, technologies of government, and institutional settings (types of action and interaction) that are taken for granted and reified in specific economic imaginaries. These elements are subject to contestation and can change, particularly at historical junctures.⁶ Economic imaginaries are ontologically real, because they shape the social world. They also constitute epistemological tools, because their constitutive elements can be identified analytically, allowing for the imaginaries and the contestations surrounding them to be made visible.⁷

³Sangeeta Khorana and William A. Kerr, 'The stillborn United Kingdom–United States trade agreement: Political optimism meets vested interests', *World Affairs*, 186:2 (2023), pp. 252–83; Jim Rollo and Peter Holmes, 'EU–UK post-Brexit trade relations: Prosperity versus sovereignty?', *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 25:4 (2020): 523–50; Erica Owen and Stefanie Walter, 'Open economy politics and Brexit: Insights, puzzles, and ways forward', *Review of International Political Economy*, 24:2 (2017), pp. 179–202.

⁴Gabriel Siles-Brügge, 'Bound by gravity or living in a "post geography trading world"? Expert knowledge and affective spatial imaginaries in the construction of the UK's post-Brexit trade policy', *New Political Economy*, 24:3 (2019), pp. 422–39; Tony Heron and Gabriel Siles-Brügge, 'UK–US trade relations and "Global Britain"', *The Political Quarterly*, 92:4 (2021), pp. 732–6; Clair Gammage and Philip Syrpis, 'Sovereignty fictions in the United Kingdom's trade agenda', *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, 71:3 (2022), pp. 563–88; Angelos Chrysosgelos, 'Contesting international economic governance: The "people" and trade in the Trump and Brexit rhetoric', in Michele Egan, Kolja Raube, Jan Wouters, and Julien Chaisse (eds), *Contestation and Polarization in Global Governance: European Responses* (Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar, 2023), pp. 108–23 (p. 109); Michelle Egan and Mark Webber, 'Brexit and "Global Britain": Role adaptation and contestation in trade policy', *International Politics* (2023), online first; Maria J. Garcia, 'Post-Brexit trade policy in the UK: Placebo policy-making?', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 30:11 (2023), pp. 2492–518.

⁵Bob Jessop, 'Cultural political economy and critical policy studies', *Critical Policy Studies*, 3:3–4 (2010), pp. 336–56 (p. 344).

⁶Jessop, 'Cultural political economy', p. 344.

⁷Jack Foster, 'Envisaging global balance-sheet capitalism: The Bank for International Settlements as a collective organic intellectual', *Capital & Class*, 46:3 (2022), pp. 401–25.

UK post-Brexit trade policy constitutes a good case for advancing cultural political economy scholarship. In the literature, economic imaginaries have been used to study the politics of finance and the cultural political economy of climate change⁸ but, to our knowledge, have not been mobilised to examine the political economy of trade. Furthermore, the process of regaining trade policy autonomy after almost 50 years within the EU's common commercial policy necessarily raises questions for UK policymakers about the purposes and goals of trade policy. Such historical junctures provoke political contestations around the ordinarily settled cultural foundations of economic policy. Our contribution thus provides insights into a policy process in which the cultural foundations of political economy undergo change. Using UK post-Brexit trade as our empirical example, we explore how certain actors and ideas dominate economic policy, and how others fall behind. Our study highlights how power is exercised in times of political economy adjustments through practices of meaning making.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section briefly sets out the parameters of the UK–Australia deal before reviewing the literature on UK post-Brexit trade policy and setting out the limitations we see in established political economy frameworks. The third section discusses the cultural political economy framework we employ and the generally accepted economic imaginary of UK post-Brexit trade policymaking that we identified in our analysis. The next section discusses the two competing economic imaginaries that animated political struggles over the UK–Australia FTA in the UK parliament in 2022 and shows how a competitive free trade imaginary came to dominate the UK's approach to its FTA with Australia. The final section concludes with avenues for future research on UK trade policy and implications of our study for cultural political economy more widely.

The political economy of UK post-Brexit trade policy

The UK–Australia FTA is a comprehensive trade agreement consisting of 32 chapters. It includes the elimination of tariffs on industrial goods, as is the norm among almost all FTAs.⁹ One noteworthy element is the chapter on agriculture – a sector in which Australia is highly competitive while the UK is largely uncompetitive – where the UK gives far larger concessions to Australia than found in other similar agreements. Notably, the UK included the complete removal of all tariff rate quotas, with a phase-in period of up to 15 years for the most sensitive products (beef and sheep meat). The chapter on financial services – a sector where the UK economy is competitive – provides for some limited areas of liberalisation but in effect does not commit to new market access. In addition, there are a number of new provisions, expanding opportunities for young people to travel and work in the other country, a chapter on digital trade, and chapters on various trade-related issues including labour, the environment, animal welfare, and gender.

There is consensus in the emerging post-Brexit trade literature that UK policy choices in independent trade negotiations have failed to reflect the preferences of domestic stakeholders, including business groups, devolved administrations, and the wider population, and that dynamics within government are for the most part shaping UK post-Brexit trade policy. Overall, the UK–Australia deal has been seen as an example of the UK government putting its desire to perform on Brexit over and above the UK economy.¹⁰ Two strands of literature have emerged to explore these dynamics.

⁸Foster, 'Envisaging global balance-sheet capitalism'; Lana Swartz, 'What was Bitcoin, what will it be? The techno-economic imaginaries of a new money technology', *Cultural Studies*, 32:4 (2018), pp. 623–50; David L. Levy and André Spicer, 'Contested imaginaries and the cultural political economy of climate change', *Organization*, 20:5 (2013), pp. 659–78.

⁹For a more complete analysis, see The Trade and Public Policy Network, 'What's in the UK–Australia FTA? Preliminary Reflections', available from {<https://www.lse.ac.uk/law/Assets/Documents/news/tapp.pdf>}.

¹⁰Garcia, 'Post-Brexit trade policy in the UK', Rollo and Holmes, 'EU–UK post-Brexit trade relations'.

Open Economy Politics (OEP) has been applied to UK post-Brexit trade but has been found to have limitations.¹¹ OEP is rooted in liberal political economy, which adopts the position that liberalisation leads to economic prosperity, benefiting consumers through lower prices and greater choice. For producers, the equation is more complex. Some producers are vulnerable to increased competition from lower-cost suppliers in other countries and lobby the government for protection. Conversely, competitive industries mobilise in favour of liberalisation, as it will provide them greater export opportunities. The Stolper-Samuelson theorem adds that low-skilled workers in rich countries require redistribution if they are not to lose out through import competition. These varied material impacts of trade policy determine the incentives actors face to mobilise in favour of or against further liberalisation. Trade policy formation emerges from a political balancing of these interests across the countries involved.¹²

Erica Owens and Stefanie Walter applied an OEP approach to the Brexit referendum, finding that it explains certain aspects of the vote but also faces significant challenges.¹³ Though it might be tempting to interpret the Brexit vote as losers from globalisation pushing back against liberalisation, as OEP suggests, this is hard to square with the particularities of the Brexit debate. For instance, a key element of the Leave campaign was a call for a more open, more ‘global’ Britain, once it was free to sign new FTAs, or even for the UK to adopt unilateral free trade. The Leave vote, Owens and Walter note, was less a backlash of ‘globalisation losers’ and more ‘driven by voters who feel uncomfortable in the modern, open world more generally.’¹⁴ They conclude that OEP models need to do more in the future to integrate social elements and reduce the emphasis on material factors.¹⁵

Focusing on UK–US talks for a bilateral trade agreement following Brexit, Sangeeta Khorana and William Kerr find that reciprocity in economic concessions would have required cross-sectoral trade-offs involving agriculture, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and health care services, which the America First and Global Britain approaches dominant at the time did not allow. The authors acknowledge that the ‘present study suffers from absence of information on the discussions that led to the establishment of new, or reoriented, trade institutions and the formulation of new trade policies and negotiating strategies.’¹⁶ They conclude that their study ‘hints that, while economic theory strongly supports free trade and outward-oriented trade agreements, trade policy is decidedly in the political realm and economic arguments constitute only one – albeit essential – dimension of trade negotiations.’¹⁷

The second strand of literature on UK trade policy post-Brexit emphasises the emotional, performative, symbolic, and rhetorical elements of trade policy.¹⁸ A desire to perform independence from the EU and to deliver on promises of the Brexit campaign is seen as a chief motivation among UK post-Brexit governments.¹⁹ Gabriel Siles-Brügge asserts that in 2017, two rival factions in the Cabinet shaped UK post-Brexit trade strategy based on differing prerogatives. One group was driven by considerations of economic cost, while the other group appealed to an ‘emotive political economy of bringing the UK, and its (in this imaginary) overly regulated economy, closer to its “kith and kin” in the Anglosphere, deepening the UK “national business model”.’²⁰ Clair

¹¹ For example, Owen and Walter, ‘Open economy politics and Brexit’; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, ‘BREXIT, voice and loyalty: rethinking electoral politics in an age of interdependence’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 24:2 (2017), pp. 232–47.

¹² Elhanan Helpman, ‘Politics and Trade Policy’, NBER Working Paper no. 5309 (1995).

¹³ Owen and Walter, ‘Open economy politics and Brexit’.

¹⁴ Owen and Walter, ‘Open economy politics and Brexit’, p. 183.

¹⁵ Owen and Walter, ‘Open economy politics and Brexit’.

¹⁶ Khorana and Kerr, ‘The stillborn’, p. 278.

¹⁷ Khorana and Kerr, ‘The stillborn’, p. 277.

¹⁸ Garcia, ‘Post-Brexit trade policy’.

¹⁹ Garcia, ‘Post-Brexit trade policy’; Siles-Brügge, ‘Bound by gravity’; Heron and Siles-Brügge, ‘UK–US trade relations; Chryssogelos, ‘Contesting’, p. 109.

²⁰ Siles-Brügge, ‘Bound by gravity’, p. 422.

Gammage and Philip Syrpis, meanwhile, highlight the ‘weaponisation’ of an absolutist version of sovereignty by elements of the UK government, and how this conflicts with a more cooperative politics that would be necessary for securing future trade deals.²¹ Maria Garcia relies on symbolic policy approaches that argue that, when faced with complex problems, politicians enact ‘placebo policies’ to create a (false) appearance of doing something. She argues: ‘In its desire to demonstrate the independence from the EU, the UK has sought, thus far, to conclude negotiations at haste, selecting partners, not on the basis of economic welfare gains, but on likelihood of success.’²²

While we agree that emotional, performative, symbolic, and rhetorical factors played a role in how the UK government negotiated and ratified the Australia agreement, the question remains of how these factors link to material and power political aspirations of key actors and how these actors strive to reorient UK policy thereto. The Leave campaign promised not only quick but also better-than-EU trade agreements.²³ The UK government could have symbolically performed independence and sovereignty by taking a tough stance in trade negotiations, rather than by hastening along conclusions of FTAs. Furthermore, with the UK–Australia FTA, the UK has achieved a trade agreement that goes beyond performance, symbolism, and appearance and reshapes, to some extent, the UK’s domestic economic terrain and position in the global political economy. The concepts of performance and symbolism, though useful, can therefore explain only so much. We see cultural political economy as a promising theoretical approach to advance our understanding of UK post-Brexit trade policy, because its emphasis on culture as meaning making does not separate ideas and interests in the political economy of trade but recognised them as co-constitutive of the social world.

A number of trade scholars have identified the centrality of cultural foundations to trade. Frank Trentmann, for example, argues that collective meanings and political discourses determine how economic interests are understood and formulated.²⁴ The works of Trentmann, Siles-Brügge, and J. P. Singh show that trade actors rely on ideas, values, discourses, identities, collective memories and meanings, and ideologies in order to understand trade policy problems and make decisions.²⁵ Francesco Duina and Ezekiel Smith add that political actors undergo social processes that pre-constitute them for economic exchange, such as professional training, but they also define and redefine themselves during their engagements in trade policymaking.²⁶

Together, these works emphasise that the cultural foundations of trade policy change over time, leading to changes in the political economy of trade. Singh, for example, exposes how racist and paternalistic values drive outcomes in trade negotiations.²⁷ He suggests that undermining racist and paternalistic values in trade governance may lead to more favourable outcomes for Global South countries. For Trentmann, sidelining the cultural aspects of trade misrepresents political reality. He suggests that free trade reached the status of collective good in Victorian and Edwardian Britain based on the political ideas, values, and discourses that shaped group identities at the time, rather than individual self-interest and the logic of collective action.²⁸

²¹Gammage and Syrpis, ‘Sovereignty fictions.’

²²Garcia, ‘Post-Brexit trade policy’, p. 2510.

²³Franco Zappettini, ‘The official vision for “Global Britain”: Brexit as rupture and continuity between free trade, liberal internationalism and “values”’, in Veronika Koller, Susanne Kopf, and Marlene Miglbauer (eds), *Discourses of Brexit* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 140–54.

²⁴Frank Trentmann, ‘Political culture and political economy: Interest, ideology and free trade.’ *Review of International Political Economy*, 5:2 (1998), pp. 217–51.

²⁵Trentmann, ‘Political culture’; J. P. Singh, *Sweet Talk: Paternalism and Collective Action in North–South Trade Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017); and Gabriel Siles-Brügge, *Constructing European Union Trade Policy: A Global Idea of Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

²⁶Francesco Duina and Ezekiel Smith, ‘Affirming Europe with trade: Deal negotiations and the making of a political identity’, *Comparative European Politics*, 17:4 (2019), pp. 491–511. See also Lyn Spillman, ‘Enriching exchange: Cultural dimensions of markets’, *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 58:4 (1999), pp. 1047–71.

²⁷Singh, *Sweet Talk*.

²⁸Trentmann, ‘Political culture.’

Despite these useful advances, no consolidated or systematic framework exists, to our knowledge, to assess how practices of meaning making shape the political economy of trade. In the next section, we discuss our approach and how we deploy it to analyse UK parliamentary debates in the lead up to the UK's first post-Brexit trade agreement with Australia.

A cultural political economy of trade

As a field of inquiry, cultural political economy has been argued to be an attempt 'to make sense of what political economy would look like if we took seriously the role of culture.'²⁹ That said, for others the approach is 'less about "adding culture" than about challenging positivist epistemologies in social research.'³⁰ In a sense, then, for some the 'cultural' in cultural political economy may be a slight misnomer and may suggest a greater emphasis on cultural factors than is fully warranted within some of the literature.³¹ What unites the literature, however, is an emphasis on non-material dimensions of political economy. It builds on anthropology, geography, sociology, and economic history in order to redraw the ontological and epistemological assumptions of political economy.³² Analytically and conceptually, cultural political economy foregrounds 'the cultural constitution of economic practices', which provides an alternative account into political economy, where the latter is seen as driven by the interplay of economic, political, and social dimensions, rather than prioritising the role played by any one factor.³³

Cultural political economy is a pluralist field, and scholars follow what Josef Hien calls 'rational efficiency-centred institutionalism', 'material Marxism', or approaches building on the writings of Gustav von Schmoller and Max Weber.³⁴ For reasons of space, we are unable to substantially review the lively debate between these various schools of cultural political economy.³⁵ However, we caution against Weberian and similar conceptualisations of culture as the 'prevalent economic style of a society at a given epoch' that 'changes with ideational, technological and legal changes, leading societies through a more or less fixed stage model of economic development.'³⁶ We note that such fixed notions of culture rarely can be shown to exist empirically in the world. Weberian cultural political economy approaches also tend to conceptualise ideas, interests, and institutions

²⁹Jacqueline Best and Matthew Paterson. 'Towards a cultural political economy – not a cultural IPE', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:2 (2015), pp. 738–40 (p. 738).

³⁰William Biebuyck and Judith Meltzer. 'Cultural political economy'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Online resource, available from {<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.140>}.

³¹This article could, for some, fall into such a category as it does not engage in a 'deep culture' analysis of the UK. Rather, our emphasis is on the contestation over meaning-making, alongside more material factors. It is, however, squarely in line with other elements of the literature, particularly that of Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum.

³²Jacqueline Best and Matthew Paterson (eds), *Cultural Political Economy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); Stuart Shields, Ian Bruff, and Huw Macartney (eds), *Critical International Political Economy: Dialogue, Debate and Dissensus* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³³Best and Paterson, 'Towards a cultural political economy', p. 738.

³⁴Josef Hien, 'Cultural political economy: An alternative approach to understanding the divergences between Italian and German positions during the Euro crisis', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 58:4 (2020), pp. 1056–73 (p. 1057); Werner Abelshausser, David A. Gilgen, and Andreas Leutzsch, 'Kultur, Wirtschaft, Kulturen der Weltwirtschaft', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Special Issue 24 (2012): pp. 9–28; Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum, 'Cultural political economy: Logics of discovery, epistemic fallacies, the complexity of emergence, and the potential of the cultural turn', *New Political Economy*, 15:3 (2010), pp. 445–51.

³⁵To review this debate, see *inter alia* Juan Ignacio Staricco, 'Putting culture in its place? A critical engagement with cultural political economy', *New Political Economy*, 22:3 (2017), pp. 328–41; Bob Jessop and Ngai-Lim Sum, 'Putting the Amsterdam School in its rightful place: A reply to Juan Ignacio Staricco's critique of cultural political economy', *New Political Economy*, 22:3 (2017), pp. 342–54; Bas Van Heur, 'Beyond regulation: Towards a cultural political economy of complexity and emergence', *New Political Economy*, 15:3 (2010), pp. 421–44; Jessop and Sum, 'Cultural political economy'; Bob Jessop and Stijn Oosterlynck, 'Cultural political economy: On making the cultural turn without falling into soft economic sociology', *Geoforum*, 39:3 (2008), pp. 1155–69.

³⁶Hien, 'Cultural political economy', p. 1060.

as separate, but interacting elements of the social world. As outlined above, this is precisely one limitation of the existing UK trade literature that we hope to move beyond with our intervention.

Following Jessop and colleagues, we find culture to be most usefully understood as ‘semiotic practice’, or ‘practices of meaning making.’³⁷ As Ngai-Ling Sum and Jessop explain, the fundamental assumption of cultural political economy is that ‘technical and economic objects are always socially constructed, historically specific, more or less socially embedded or disembedded.’³⁸ Studying ‘culture’ here means placing the analytical focus on these complex and messy processes of social construction, rather than rendering such contested processes invisible through fixed meanings of cultures, ideas, interests, or institutions. In what follows, we refer to this approach as ‘cultural political economy’, while acknowledging that cultural political economy can be conducted based on other ontological and epistemological foundations.

Methodologically, we rely on the conceptual and analytical tool of economic imaginaries first coined by Jessop in his 2010 article ‘Cultural political economy and critical policy studies.’ In this piece, Jessop observes that the social world is a chaotic sum of near-infinite complexity. In order to undertake actions, actors must select certain aspects of that complex whole on which to focus.³⁹ Only some semiotic practices are viable because meaning making is conditioned by and embedded within ‘the natural and social world.’⁴⁰ As such, semiotic practice does not occur independently of external constraints. Rather, the material world directly limits language and ways of thinking and acting. In this way, cultural political economy takes the cultural turn in International Relations seriously but avoids the pitfall of treating social reality as reducible solely to semiotic acts.⁴¹ Cultural political economy treats the world as pre-existing but sees any attempts to understand it or shape it as requiring semiosis.⁴²

Jessop highlights that ‘the economy’ is a contested, socially constructed category. Because ‘the totality of economic activities is ... unstructured and complex,’⁴³ Jessop posits that political actors use economic imaginaries in order to make sense of, engage with and organise ‘the economy’. He identifies four dimensions of economic imaginaries through which political actors reduce complexity and make social and political action possible. They are: (i) semiosis; (ii) technologies; (iii) agency; and (iv) structuration.

Taking these in turn: (i) semiosis includes discourse, drawing on Foucault, but also includes regularised ways of acting and of creating knowledge and meaning. Semiosis is central to the production of meaning, fixing and (re)producing understandings of the world and contributing to complexity reduction. Cultural political economy sees such semiosis as not merely interpreting events but partly determining what actions are taken, thereby shaping the nature of the world. Building again on Foucault, (ii) governing technologies refer to the practices, techniques, and tools through which economies are made manageable.⁴⁴ They include particular classifications, calculations, and ways of going about governing that are normalised and presented as naturally appropriate for running the economy. Technologies of government reduce complexity by prescribing particular types of social activity and limiting what discourses, ways of acting, and types of knowledge seem appropriate in economic policymaking. They also structure interactions among

³⁷Trommer, ‘Watering down austerity’, p. 221.

³⁸Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Putting Culture in Its Place in Political Economy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013), p. 11.

³⁹Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’, p. 338.

⁴⁰Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’, p. 338.

⁴¹Ronen Palan, ‘A world of their making: An evaluation of the constructivist critique in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 26:4 (2000), pp. 575–98; Matthias Hofferberth and Christian Weber, ‘Lost in translation: A critique of constructivist norm research’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18:1 (2015), pp. 75–103.

⁴²Sum and Jessop, *Towards a Cultural Political Economy*, p. 3.

⁴³Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’, p. 345.

⁴⁴See Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’; and Ngai-Ling Sum, ‘The production of hegemonic policy discourses: “Competitiveness” as a knowledge brand and its (re-)contextualizations’, *Critical Policy Studies*, 3:2 (2009), pp. 184–203.

political actors and institutions. Third, certain political actors hold special (iii) agency over outcomes above everyone else. Their personal identities, beliefs, worldviews, and preferences for governing technologies are privileged in the semiotic processes we study, which further reduces complexity. Yet the especially empowered position of certain actors to shape economic policy processes and outcomes may itself be subject to contestation by other actors. Finally, (iv) structuration refers to the imposition of expected patterns of social interaction onto the (unstructured) social world as a means of complexity reduction through making activities (to an extent) regularised and predictable.⁴⁵ Institutions and the taken-for-granted relationships between them contribute to shaping and constraining policy outcomes. Distinct discourses, technologies of government, and types of agency are embedded in institutional landscapes at key moments in time, become entrenched, and can affect policy direction into the future. Institutions and the taken-for-granted relationships between them provide the structural framework in which trade policy takes place.⁴⁶ The boundaries between these four dimensions are blurred as the dimensions interact to form a coherent semiotic system of the economy, or what Jessop calls the ‘economic imaginary’. The specific selectivities of different economic imaginaries derive from how social, material, and political considerations work together to produce each specific imaginary and its constituent elements.

While structuration is typically settled, Brexit constituted a historical juncture in UK trade policy when expected patterns of interaction ruptured, due to the EU relinquishing trade policy authority. This unsettling of the cultural foundations of UK trade policy provided political opportunity for contestations around semiosis, techniques of government, and agency. In other words, Brexit produced a rare historical moment in which different economic imaginaries could compete over dominating UK post-Brexit trade policy. The ratification of the UK’s first post-Brexit, from-scratch FTA with Australia presents one arena in which these struggles over the future of UK trade policy played out.

To conduct our analysis, we traced the economic imaginaries that animated UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA in 2022, that is to say in the year the UK ratified the FTA. While parliamentary debates do not reflect all social forces relevant for the political economy of trade, they capture and channel those parts of the public debate that Members of Parliament (MPs) deem essential. This reveals the policy preferences and rationalisations of those actors that are politically empowered above everyone else to shape trade policy. Parliamentary debates are also one key element in the UK ratification process of the agreement. As a legal-constitutional process, they form a political action in their own right. Therefore, the parliamentary debates that we analyse are not reducible to rhetoric. They are discussions that are, by their nature, a legal-political process.

As data sources, we retrieved via Hansard and analysed five UK Houses of Parliament debates on the UK–Australia FTA: the House of Commons debates in 2022 on 5 January, 6 September, 14 November, and 12 December; and the House of Lords debate on 11 July 2022. In the interest of data manageability, we excluded records of Committee meetings and responses to individual questions from our analysis. While we did not capture the totality of interventions made regarding the UK–Australia FTA in the UK parliament in 2022, analysing the five dedicated debates provides a comprehensive, if strictly speaking incomplete picture. While this poses limitations to our findings, the data we relied on is publicly accessible, and future research may verify and complete our analysis.

Analytically, we built on recent literature using Jessop’s economic imaginaries that relies on textual analysis of publicly accessible policy documents, speeches, and debates.⁴⁷ In line with this approach, we read and coded each UK parliamentary debate on the UK–Australia FTA in 2022,

⁴⁵Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’, p. 338.

⁴⁶Judith Goldstein, *Ideas, Interests and American Trade Policy*, (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1993); and Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen, and Frank Longstreth (eds), *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁴⁷Foster, ‘Envisaging global balance-sheet capitalism’; Swartz, ‘What was Bitcoin, what will it be’; Levy and Spicer, ‘Contested imaginaries and the cultural political economy of climate change’.

Table 1. Prominent terms in UK parliamentary debates on UK–Australia FTA.

| | Semiosis | Techniques | Agency | Structuration |
|--------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Governing party | Animal welfare; borders; climate change; competitiveness; consumer standards; democracy; free trade; independence; international cooperation; investment; union | Free flows of investment, data; freer flow of people; high standards for animal welfare, consumers, environment; impact assessment | Secretary of State | Government; parliament |
| Opposition parties | Animal welfare; climate change; consumer standards; democracy; free trade; international cooperation; labour standards; NHS | High standards for animal welfare, consumers, labour, environment; impact assessment; Core trade policy | Farmers unions; Secretary of State; Trade unions | Devolved administrations; government; parliament |

identifying each of the four dimensions of economic imaginaries in each MP's or peer's intervention, recording party membership each time. In addition to categorising themes that speakers raised under semiosis, governing techniques, agency, and structuration, we also assessed what hierarchical and causal relationships were privileged in connecting different themes, what political constellations among actors and what courses of actions were presented as appropriate, and for what reasons. Our process of data analysis was not linear but moved through iterative rounds of reading the debates, coding, and categorising the semiotic elements within them, as well as how they related to each other.

Our analysis revealed one generally accepted economic imaginary and two competing economic imaginaries in UK post-Brexit trade policy at the time of the UK–Australia FTA. We discuss the generally accepted economic imaginary here, as identifying it provided one important methodological step in identifying the two competing economic imaginaries, which we discuss in the following section.

Table 1 shows what terms were prominent in UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA that we analysed. It shows that there existed an economic imaginary that UK parliamentarians of all parties and both houses shared in 2022, which builds on semiotic elements that are in principle accepted by all MPs/peers.

The shared economic imaginary for UK post-Brexit trade policy that emerged from our analysis is concerned with (among other things) animal welfare, climate change, democracy, and international cooperation and sees free trade as central to achieving all of the other goals. It relies on impact assessments of trade policies and the retention of high regulatory standards in free trade agreements as appropriate techniques of governing trade. It accepts that the Secretary of State is extraordinarily empowered to influence trade policy outcomes and sees government and parliament as institutions that play pivotal roles in structuring UK trade policymaking.

The table shows that in two respects, our analysis of parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA stands in contrast with the above-discussed scholarly literature on UK post-Brexit trade policy. Notably, neither 'independence' nor 'Global Britain' appeared in our analysis as discourses that a wide range of UK parliamentarians collectively endorsed or debated. Representatives of the governing party and the government did raise the importance of the UK's independence from the EU several times, and the Secretary of State raised Global Britain repeatedly in her interventions. Beyond these, however, the majority of representatives did not engage in these discourses,

other than to occasionally mock or invert them. Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade (hereafter: Shadow Secretary) Nick Thomas-Symonds (Labour) for example stated that ‘this is not the good ship Britannia delivering trade for global Britain; it is more like “Pirates of the Caribbean”, with a ghost ship manned by a zombie Government beset by infighting, mutiny and dishonesty’.⁴⁸ Future research may clarify whether these discourses were only marginal to the specific context of UK parliament debating trade policy with Australia, or whether they generally failed to shape UK post-Brexit trade policy in the medium to long run.

In the debates that we analysed, contestation centred specifically around free trade discourse; impact assessment and regulatory standards in free trade agreements; the agency of the Secretary of State; and the role of parliament in structuring the outcomes of UK–Australia trade talks, which we briefly discuss here.

Free trade discourse

‘Free trade’ discourse emerged as dominant in UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA in 2022. MPs and peers either spoke in favour of free trade or did not openly oppose it. Many specifically endorsed free trade and put forward openly protectionist or wider socio-economic or political perspectives in one and the same intervention. Several MPs and Peers spoke in terms of subordinating trade liberalisation to social goals. Tim Farron (Liberal Democrats), for example, argued: ‘trade deals must have strategic value when it comes to protecting our ability to feed ourselves as a country’.⁴⁹ Lord Kerr of Kinlochard (Cross-bencher) stated: ‘I am a free trader, but I do not think that trade liberalisation can be ring-fenced overriding all else’.⁵⁰

Furthermore, the centrality of free trade was declared not only in material, but also in societal terms, showing that ideas and interests, or material, political, and societal dimensions, are co-constitutive dimensions of the political economy of trade, rather than separate forces. This was perhaps best expressed when opposition MP Garreth Thomas (Labour) asserted, in line with Trentmann’s historical findings mentioned in the previous section, that ‘it is part of what it means to be British’.⁵¹ The fact that free trade discourse was adopted even by those who disagreed with free trade implies that free trade as an abstract concept has limited power to shed light on trade policy outcomes. As our cultural political economy analysis reveals in the next section, much depends on how policymakers fill abstract concepts with different meanings and with different policy practices, including governing techniques and relations among key actors and institutions.

Impact assessments and high regulatory standards

In the debates we analysed, all UK parliamentarians deemed impact assessments of trade policy and high regulatory standards in FTAs as appropriate trade governing techniques in principle. A number of opposition MPs and peers called for a ‘core trade policy and a core set of objectives from the Government’,⁵² which they saw as a document against which individual trade policy instruments should be assessed.⁵³ Aside from pointing to this missing governing technique, no challenges were raised to the assumption that impact assessments and liberalisation-with-safeguards are in principle appropriate trade-governing techniques.

Like many governments around the world, the UK government used computable general equilibrium (CGE) modelling as its principal method for assessing the expected impacts of the UK–Australia FTA on UK regions and specific social groups based on sex, ethnicity, disability, and

⁴⁸Hansard HC Deb., 06/09/22, Vol. 719 Col. 146.

⁴⁹Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 416.

⁵⁰Hansard, 11/07/22, Col. 1290.

⁵¹Hansard, 12/12/22, Col. 751.

⁵²Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 419.

⁵³Hansard, 11/07/22, Col. 1281.

age.⁵⁴ Under this technology of government,⁵⁵ major policy changes undergo multiple competing econometric analyses, based on varying underlying assumptions and the inclusion of varying sectors. CGE modelling is contested as it can be undertaken teleologically.⁵⁶ Indeed, the UK's Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC), an independent regulatory scrutiny body for the UK government, deemed the government's original impact assessment of the UK–Australia FTA 'not fit for purpose'. This was due to 'concerns about the presentation of the results ... which the RPC found disproportionately emphasised the beneficial impacts with very limited discussion of the risks and disadvantageous impacts of the FTA'.⁵⁷ The Government's second impact assessment estimated a 0.08% GDP increase in the UK by 2035, the potential for a 53% increase in trade between the parties, and a 0.1% increase in UK real wages, with a sectoral shift away from agriculture to manufacturing. For our cultural political economy approach, it is important to acknowledge that these are constructed economic facts. So-called economic interests are constructed out of governing techniques such as impact assessments, which have selected understandings of and preferences for the economy built into their underlying methodologies.

The second trade governing technique that UK parliamentarians endorsed in principle is crafting international trade rules that simultaneously remove barriers to trade while also safeguarding regulatory space for legitimate government action in other policy domains. Barriers to trade are 'any measures that in some way influence, limit or deny market access for goods or services'.⁵⁸ Unless it is specified which types of measures constitute the target of trade liberalisation, any government action at all could in principle be relevant. Where the correct balance should be struck between trade liberalisation and safeguarding wider public policy goals is a matter of intersubjective interpretation and consensus in the trade regime and has shifted over time.⁵⁹ What is crucial for our cultural political economy analysis is to recognise that questions of which government actions to remove as trade barriers, which government actions to allow as legitimate, and which legal and regulatory tools best achieve this are not neutral but are themselves part and parcel of how the economy is selectively constructed via different economic imaginaries.

Taken together, the two governing technologies work to make complex trade policy questions tackleable, yet they do not remove the need for further complexity reduction. As we show below, different kinds of selectivities can in principle find expression in both of these techniques.

The agency of the Secretary of State

Following the Brexit referendum, the UK government gave extraordinary agency over UK trade policy to the Secretary of State for the Department for International Trade (which in 2023 was merged into a newly created Department for Business and Trade). The responsibilities of the Secretary of State were, specifically to 'deliver' on 'securing world-class free trade agreements', 'encouraging economic growth and a green industrial revolution', 'supporting UK businesses to take full advantage of trade opportunities', and 'championing the rules-based international trading system and operating the UK's new trading system'.⁶⁰ As we also discuss in relation to structuration, there existed a grey zone in UK politics around the question of the power of the Secretary of

⁵⁴Department of International Trade, 'Impact assessment of the Free Trade Agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Australia' (2021).

⁵⁵Technically, some are partial equilibrium simulations. We use CGE throughout for ease of expression.

⁵⁶Frank Ackerman and Kevin P Gallagher, 'The shrinking gains from global trade liberalization in computable general equilibrium models: A critical assessment', *International Journal of Political Economy*, 37:1 (2008), pp 50–77.

⁵⁷Regulatory Policy Committee (RPC), 'The UK–Australia Free Trade Agreement', RPC-DIT-5109(2) (2021), p. 2.

⁵⁸WTO, *WTO Dictionary of Trade Policy Terms* (2007), p. 51.

⁵⁹Andrew T. F. Lang, 'World trade law after neo-liberalism', *Social and Legal Studies*, 23:3 (2014), pp. 408–25; Trentman, 'Political culture'.

⁶⁰HM Government, 'Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade', available at: {www.gov.uk/government/ministers/secretary-of-state-for-international-trade}.

the State at the time of the UK–Australia deal, in particular in relation to questions of whom the Secretary was accountable to and what political institutions should hold power over the Secretary. This uncertainty arose because the UK lacked clear, tried and tested constitutional, administrative, and procedural frameworks prescribing how other agencies, institutions, and actors should work with the UK's top trade bureaucrat and keep their special authorities and powers in check.

The fact that the two Secretaries of State in office during the UK–Australia FTA negotiations and ratification process held agency above everyone else over the UK's post-Brexit trade agreements was not contested in the parliamentary debates we analysed. These were Liz Truss and Anne-Marie Trevelyan, whose positions on trade policy we briefly summarise. Truss is known to be a supporter of free market economics and has ties with free market think-tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute.⁶¹ Detailing her vision as Secretary of State at Chatham House in October 2020, Truss set out her support for free trade.⁶² She was a co-author of *Britannia Unchained*, which announced the principles and values of what came to be called 'Singapore on Thames,' namely deregulation, free trade, entrepreneurialism, and a lean responsiveness towards the labour force. Trevelyan is equally known to endorse the idea of the UK as an entrepreneurial, free trading country. In a keynote address in 2021, Trevelyan praised 'that buccaneering spirit and entrepreneurship of explorers like Ralph Fitch and Captain Cook' and pledged to guide the UK 'as an independent, sovereign, free trading nation once again, realising untapped trading opportunities ... around the world.'⁶³ Trevelyan lauds such values and aspirations as an essential part of British identity, with Brexit opening the opportunity to 'chart a new course ... and use our newfound freedom to once again become global champions of free and fair trade.'⁶⁴

As we show below, parliamentarians heavily contested the manner in which the two Secretaries of State in office during the UK–Australia FTA negotiations and ratification process used the extraordinary powers of their role in order to bring about these free trade visions.

The role of parliament

In the parliamentary debates that we analysed, there was unanimity among all MPs and peers that trade decision-making post-Brexit needed to be democratic, accountable, and transparent.⁶⁵ However, the question of what democratic trade politics meant in practice was the biggest area of contention in UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA. We focus here on the role of the UK parliament, which was the key bone of contention in the debates we analysed, acknowledging that the roles of devolved administrations and civil society actors were also raised by a number of parliamentarians and have attracted scholarly attention.⁶⁶

While the UK government can undertake tariff reductions by negative statutory instrument,⁶⁷ FTAs increasingly concern regulation, as domestic rules and regulation are today increasingly perceived as trade barriers, requiring a recalibrating of the balancing exercise mentioned above under governing technologies.⁶⁸ As a result, FTAs require formal approval by parliament. Beyond

⁶¹ *The Economist*, 'Liz Truss and the power of perkiness' (8 April 2021).

⁶² Elizabeth Truss, 'Chatham House speech: Liz Truss sets out vision for values-driven free trade', 29 October 2020, available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chatham-house-speech-liz-truss-sets-out-vision-for-values-driven-free-trade].

⁶³ Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Keynote address at Asia House global trade dialogue', 13 December 2021, Asia House, available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/anne-marie-trevelyan-keynote-address-at-asia-house-global-trade-dialogue].

⁶⁴ Anne-Marie Trevelyan delivers speech on free trade at Centre for Policy Studies', 22 November 2021, available at: www.gov.uk/government/speeches/anne-marie-trevelyan-delivers-speech-on-free-trade-at-centre-for-policy-studies].

⁶⁵ Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 71; Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 74.

⁶⁶ David Eiser, Nicola McEwen, and Graeme Roy, 'The trade policies of Brexit Britain: The influence of and impacts on the devolved nations', *European Review of International Studies*, 8:1 (2021), pp. 22–48.

⁶⁷ Negative Statutory Instruments are a form of Parliamentary procedure whereby statutes enter law the moment the minister signs them. See www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/negative-procedure/].

⁶⁸ Alisdair Young and John Peterson, *Parochial Global Europe: 21st Century Trade Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

these fundamental principles, the rules and regulations governing parliament's role in UK post-Brexit trade policy needed to be drawn up from scratch and the first independent post-Brexit FTA presented a testing ground and precedent for future structuration.

In practice, the rules governing the role of parliament in ratifying the UK–Australia FTA were derived from the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (the CRaG Act), with concerns raised early on that it was not up to the task, including by the House of Commons International Trade Committee.⁶⁹ A House of Lords report noted in 2020 that where a trade agreement required parliamentary assent, parliament was given 21 days of sitting time for scrutiny of the text and ‘has no role in the negotiation of agreements and has no effective veto power under the CRaG Act.’⁷⁰ The government triggered the CRaG 21 sitting-day period on 15 June 2022, just a few days after delivering the required ‘Section 42’ report on the impact of the UK–Australia FTA on human and animal health and welfare and the environment.⁷¹ The deal was ratified by default on 20 July 2022, without a parliamentary vote and without the Secretary of State making herself available to give evidence to the Commons International Trade Committee.⁷²

Structuration was the most heavily contested semiotic element in the debates that we analysed. Competing imaginaries not only held profoundly different understandings of what the role of parliament should have been in order to return sovereignty to the UK after Brexit and to enact democratic trade politics around the world. It was also the semiotic element where Conservative MPs most heavily criticised the UK government, although critics remained in the minority in the Conservative parliamentary party overall. As we show in the next section, the unsettled nature of structuration gave those holding a competitive free trade imaginary, including the two Secretaries of State, the upper hand in devising the UK's first post-Brexit independent trade agreement.

Competitive free trade and the UK–Australia FTA

Our analysis identified two competing economic imaginaries which structured contestations over the UK–Australia FTA in UK Houses of Parliament in 2022. Instead of an absence of vision in UK post-Brexit trade policy, we find two coherent but competing visions of the why, what, who, and how of post-Brexit trade policy that clashed in the parliamentary debates. We refer to them as the ‘competitive free trade’ and the ‘embedded free trade’ imaginary respectively (see Table 2).

Both imaginaries presented alternative but compatible selectivities to the general economic imaginary identified in the previous section. That is to say, both imaginaries framed ‘the economy’ in ways that appeared plausible to UK trade policymakers post-Brexit. Contestation centred on different understandings and enactments of the four semiotic elements. Below, we first discuss semiosis and governing techniques, to demonstrate how in both imaginaries, the interplay of material, political, and social factors gives rise to particular selectivities through which post-Brexit trade policy is understood and enacted. Second, our discussion of agency and structuration shows how especially empowered actors endorsing the competitive free trade imaginary used the institutional and procedural constellation in the aftermath of Brexit to shape the UK's first post-Brexit trade agreement in this imaginary.

⁶⁹House of Commons International Trade Committee, ‘UK trade policy transparency and scrutiny’, Sixth Report of Session 2017–2019, HC 1043 (2018).

⁷⁰House of Lords, ‘European Union Committee, Treaty scrutiny: working practices’, 11th Report of Session 2019–21 (2020). HL Paper 97, paragraph 7.

⁷¹House of Commons International Trade Committee, ‘UK trade negotiations: Scrutiny of Agreement with Australia, first report of session 2022–23’, HC444 (2022). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22820/documents/167654/default/>.

⁷²Chris Horseman, ‘UK ratifies Australia trade deal without parliamentary vote or debate’, *Borderlex* (21 June 2022). Available at: <https://borderlex.net>. See also the letter from Angus McNeil MP, Chair of the Commons International Trade Committee, to Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/22189/documents/164537/default/>.

Table 2. Competing economic imaginaries in UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA.

| | Semiosis | Agency | Technologies of government | Structuration |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| Competitive free trade imaginary | Regulate trade to increase competitiveness of UK economy. | The end goal of competitive free trade justifies extraordinary power. | Impact assessment shows benefits of competitiveness agenda. Deregulatory safeguards appropriate. | CRaG provides appropriate parliamentary oversight. |
| Embedded free trade imaginary | Regulate trade to create and distribute wealth and support other public policy objectives. | Legal-constitutional, procedural, moral, and ethical standards curtail extraordinary power. | Impact assessment shows flaws of competitiveness agenda. Regulatory safeguards required. | Stronger parliamentary oversight is required. |

Semiosis and governing techniques

Each free trade imaginary selectively relied on a particular mix of material, political, and social factors in order to make sense of, or enact, free trade in a particular way. Conservative MPs and peers supported the UK–Australia FTA, because they saw it as fitting with competitive free trade discourse and its concurrent deregulatory governing techniques. Members of the Opposition opposed the agreement, because they saw it as running counter to embedded free trade discourse and their perceived need for stronger trade regulation.

Conservative MPs and peers adopting competitive free trade discourse understood free trade as a means to strive for economic competitiveness, export-orientation, and greater investment.⁷³ MPs of Opposition parties in the Commons and peers endorsed embedded free trade discourse based on the idea that free trade needs to be organised with broader societal and policy goals in mind. They saw the state as holding political responsibility for this balancing exercise.

In terms of selective understandings of the economy, the competitive and the embedded free trade imaginary each focused on different groups of key stakeholders of the UK–Australia FTA, had different assumptions about the role of the state in trade policy, and diverged in their assessment of the impact assessments and the use of regulatory safeguards in the FTA. For those endorsing competitive free trade, key stakeholders were UK businesses that would be able to ‘maximise opportunity ... to invest and grow their businesses in Australia.’⁷⁴ Other important stakeholders in the competitive imaginary were UK consumers. Lowering consumer prices was seen as inherently working in favour of resolving economic inequalities within and between the UK’s four nations.⁷⁵ Embedded free trade discourse, on the other hand, was concerned with ‘UK workers and businesses’⁷⁶ and farmers.⁷⁷ The question was put: ‘What do we do when there are losers, as there always will be in any deal that changes the terms of trade?’⁷⁸

Diverging views on the key stakeholders of FTAs were linked to diverging understandings of the role of the state in each imaginary. For competitive free traders, the state should be ‘reduc[ing] red tape’⁷⁹ for making our exports even more competitive.⁸⁰ Overall, competitive free traders argued in favour of ‘fair competition and ... export opportunities.’⁸¹ Embedded free traders, on the

⁷³Hansard, H05/01/22, Col. 67.

⁷⁴Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 413.

⁷⁵Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 412.

⁷⁶Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 412.

⁷⁷Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 67.

⁷⁸Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 68.

⁷⁹Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 414.

⁸⁰Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 413.

⁸¹Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 66.

other hand, called for active state intervention to protect certain domestic interests.⁸² Tony Lloyd (Labour) pointed to the limitations of consumer choice and competition as organising principles by stating ‘competition requires information’, which in his view the state should provide.⁸³ Sarah Green (Liberal Democrats) highlighted the government support required for businesses ‘to take full advantage of new opportunities’, while pointing out the ‘inadequacies’ of existing ‘government support services’.⁸⁴

UK parliamentarians read the impact assessment of the UK–Australia FTA in ways that supported their competitive or embedded free trade imaginaries. The Secretary of State highlighted the estimated ‘combined boost of £200 million [to] the economies of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland’.⁸⁵ The Shadow Secretary noted the estimated ‘£94 million hit to our farming, forestry and fishing sectors and a £225 million hit to our semi-processed food industry’.⁸⁶ This shows that material interest does not come from outside the trade policy process but is defined, shaped and produced by practices of meaning making within the policy process itself.⁸⁷

These different selectivities were congruent with opposing assessments of the regulatory standards that had been adopted in the FTA. By way of illustration, we focus on the question of how UK farmers have been safeguarded in the UK–Australia FTA. In the competitive free trade imaginary, trade defence instruments and mutual recognition arrangements are appropriate techniques for safeguarding so-called non-trade public policy prerogatives. Trade defence instruments are temporary measures to close off markets for specific products under defined sets of economic conditions, usually in the form of tariffs or quotas. Mutual recognition arrangements are ‘agreements between two or more countries to recognize each other’s standards, qualifications, licensing requirements or testing procedures and results’, typically taken in order to reduce the cost of regulatory difference in international trade.⁸⁸

The Secretary of State asserted that the safeguards in the agreement ‘are as robust as they come’ and consist of ‘three levels of protection’, namely 10-year tariff rate quotas, product specific safeguards in years 11–15 of implementation, and a bilateral safeguard mechanism, which mirrors WTO rules.⁸⁹ In response to concerns over food safety, she asserted ‘all the safety regulations in our own domestic requirements remain clear barriers to entry’.⁹⁰ Conservative MPs pointed to consumer choice as an effective mechanism for ‘ensur[ing] that meat that does not meet those standards is not purchased’.⁹¹ They saw trade deals as not ‘necessarily ... the best way to pursue those objectives’.⁹² Overall, the competitive free trade imaginary favoured deregulatory techniques for safeguarding non-trade public policy goals and interests.

The embedded free trade imaginary called for active environmental, farming, and animal welfare standard setting within the agreement, instead of mutual recognition.⁹³ The Opposition corrected the Secretary of State by asserting that the government had negotiated ‘a non-regression clause. To be clear, that does not mean that the standards will be the same in both countries ... meat produced to far lower animal welfare standards will get tariff-free access to the UK market’.⁹⁴ They pointed to ‘staggering and astonishing differences in scale’ between UK and Australian farming

⁸²Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 70, citing Martin Kennedy of the National Farmers Union of Scotland.

⁸³Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 415.

⁸⁴Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 440.

⁸⁵Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 64.

⁸⁶Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 146.

⁸⁷Trentmann, ‘Political culture’.

⁸⁸WTO, ‘Dictionary’, p. 347.

⁸⁹Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 72.

⁹⁰Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 142.

⁹¹Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 172.

⁹²Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 415.

⁹³Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 142.

⁹⁴Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 147.

and ‘the lack of humane standards in abattoirs and ... transportation of livestock’ in Australia.⁹⁵ They also pointed to ‘actual farming safeguards’ in the EU–Australia FTA.⁹⁶ Carla Lockhart (DUP) pointed out that the deal would ‘allow the import of food products produced in ways that would be illegal here.’⁹⁷ Two Conservative Party MPs joined in the demand for stronger regulation on farming. Conservative MP Neil Hudson declared that the UK Government should have ‘put core standards in our trade deals.’⁹⁸ George Eustice (Conservative) set out that tariff quotas on beef and sheep should have been maintained indefinitely rather than being fully phased out.⁹⁹

Identity-based and emotional arguments were made in favour of competitive or embedded free trade imaginaries. Those supporting free trade discourse presented Britain as ‘an open, enterprising economy’¹⁰⁰ and conjured up its ‘free trade powers,’¹⁰¹ suggesting these were innate characteristics of British economy and society. Embedded free traders critiqued the government’s approach to the UK–Australia FTA as representing ‘laissez-faire, couldn’t care, get it over the line Brexiteer ideology’.¹⁰²

In sum, in both imaginaries, political ideas, interests, and identities worked together to shape assessments of where material interest lay, and how they should be pursued. This emphasises the point that material, political, and ideational factors do not exist independently from each other in the political economy of trade but are co-constitutive, as recognised across cultural political economy literatures and trade literatures highlighting political culture.¹⁰³

As the UK parliament was almost exactly split along party lines in supporting each of the free trade imaginaries, the distribution of extraordinary powers and the institutional setting of post-Brexit trade policy played a crucial role in determining the UK’s approach to the UK–Australia FTA. It is to agency and structuration that we turn next.

Agency and structuration

UK–Australia was the first post-Brexit trade agreement negotiated from scratch. In this context, the rules, norms, behavioural standards, and institutional relations around the negotiations and related policy processes were being made and remade, in part, through the process of negotiating and ratifying the FTA with Australia. Notably, as highlighted above, there was political uncertainty around the precise relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government. In the debates that we analysed, UK parliamentarians debated the roles and responsibilities of a range of different actors and institutions representing these branches, including a number of Committees, devolved administrations, and independent advisory bodies. We focus here on how the two diverging economic imaginaries conceived of the agency of the Secretary of State and of the powers of parliament, as these were the most heavily contested elements in the parliamentary debates that we analysed and the ones where there was most governing party support for the embedded free trade imaginary. We discuss agency and structuration separately, although, as it becomes clear in our discussion, what was at stake was exactly the question of how these dimensions should be linked and how they were linked in the process of negotiating and ratifying the UK’s FTA with Australia.

Most Conservative MPs welcomed the political agency exercised by the two Secretaries of State Truss and Trevelyan, because of the competitive free trade outcomes that they had achieved.¹³³ Andrew Rosindell (Conservative) commended ‘the Secretary of State and her predecessor ... and

⁹⁵ Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 77.

⁹⁶ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 429.

⁹⁷ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 159.

⁹⁸ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 179.

⁹⁹ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 424.

¹⁰⁰ Hansard HC Deb., 05/01/22, Vol. 706, Col. 49.

¹⁰¹ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 139.

¹⁰² Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 428.

¹⁰³ See Jessop, ‘Cultural political economy’; Ngai-Ling Sum, ‘The production of hegemonic policy discourses’; Trentmann, ‘Political culture’; Singh, *Sweet Talk*; Siles-Brügge, *Constructing European Union Trade Policy*.

strongly support[ed] all the work that has gone on to make ... this fantastic trade deal become a reality'.¹³⁴ Conversely, opposition MPs critiqued what they saw as Truss in particular sacrificing the UK's economic interests for her own 'political advantage by seeming to come up with rapid agreements'.¹³⁸ Conservative MP George Eustice joined in this critique and accused Truss of giving away the UK's initially strong negotiating position by setting an 'arbitrary' deadline to conclude the deal. He recalled: 'from that moment the UK was repeatedly on the back foot' in the negotiations.¹⁴⁰

Those parliamentarians endorsing an embedded economic imaginary in particular stressed that the two Secretaries of State actively ignored due process in intergovernmental relations.¹³⁹ Sir Mark Hendrik (Labour), for example, cited records showing that Truss 'pressed ahead with the deal despite receiving detailed warnings from her own officials in 2020 that she was acting against the UK's best interests'.¹⁴⁸ Conservative MP Neil Hudson highlighted how 'the Trade and Agricultural Commission made clear recommendations about inserting core standards ... into our trade negotiations. Sadly, the Government chose not to take that advice'.¹⁴⁹ They alluded that hidden motives lay behind the Secretaries' chosen mode of exercising special powers. Garreth Thomas (Labour) asked: 'Why has there been such a contrast between what was promised to the House for such key deals and what has happened? Is it just incompetence, laziness or poor performance from individual Ministers, or is there something more profound here?'¹⁴⁶ When challenged on her exercise of agency, Trevelyan justified shortcomings by pointing to the complexity of trade negotiations. She stated: 'I apologise for this but in a way I do not – [the agreement] is a very large tome of nearly 2000 pages'.¹⁰⁴

The debate on agency was intertwined with the debates on structuration, which overall focused on what the correct relationship between parliament and government should be in formulating trade policy and debating negotiation outcomes. Competing imaginaries of free trade filled the meaning of democratic and transparent politics with different meanings, to argue for or against more extensive executive powers over trade policy.

In the competitive free trade imaginary, the manner in which the government organised its interaction with parliament generally fulfilled the requirements of democratic decision-making on trade. Steve Baker (Conservative) asserted in the Commons in September 2022 that 'the right way [to establish trade agreements] is to use plenipotentiary powers in the name of the Crown to negotiate the deal and then [i.e. subsequently] have a serious engagement with Parliament'.¹⁰⁵ On this view, the government of the day negotiates a deal however it chooses and then fulfils the necessity of democratic oversight through debating the outcome in parliament.

The embedded free trade imaginary conversely demanded an increased role for parliament at the early stages of embarking on an FTA, in the scrutiny of negotiated texts, and in approving trade agreements in order for UK trade policymaking to be considered democratic, transparent, and accountable. To actualise demands for what Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town (Labour) called 'greater [parliamentarian] oversight of [trade] agreements',¹⁰⁶ parliamentarians called for mandate-setting powers and access to the negotiating process itself. Hywel Williams (Plaid Cymru) declared that 'MPs and the devolved Administrations should have full votes on the objectives of each future trade deal, and access to negotiating texts'.¹⁰⁷

They insisted that the government's implementation of the CRaG Act could not qualify as parliamentary scrutiny of the deal. The Shadow Secretary for example asserted that 'the agreements were signed before they came before Parliament, so the scope for meaningful debate was fatally curtailed. There has been no scrutiny worthy of the name'.¹⁰⁸ Some suspected that this was a deliberate strategy on behalf of the government in order to pass an agreement that they knew would not

¹⁰⁴Hansard, 05/01/22, Col. 70.

¹⁰⁵Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 138.

¹⁰⁶Hansard, 11/07/22, Col. 1281.

¹⁰⁷Hansard, 12/12/22, Col. 772.

¹⁰⁸Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 421.

obtain parliamentary consent. Drew Hendry (SNP), for example, called UK–Australia an ‘unmitigated disaster’ and claimed that ‘that is why Parliament is not getting the chance to scrutinise [it] properly.’¹⁰⁹

In their defence of the government’s approach, Conservative MPs attempted to depict calls for greater parliamentary involvement as impractical or as anti-democratic. Steve Baker reacted to Caroline Lucas’s (Green) assertion that ‘it is deeply undemocratic that there has not been any way for us to have a full vote on the objectives of each future trade deal or access the negotiating texts.’¹¹⁰ Baker interpreted this to mean that Lucas had called for ‘direct negotiations between parliaments’, which he called ‘an absolute nonsense’ that ‘would never get us anywhere.’¹¹¹ Hinting at the EU democratic deficit, Andrew Griffith (Conservatives) proclaimed: ‘we will take no lessons on scrutiny from those who voted again and again for the zero scrutiny that comes from British trade policy being decided ... by bureaucrats in Brussels.’¹¹² In the competitive free trade imaginary, the parliamentary oversight offered by CRaG constituted democratic and transparent trade policymaking.

A sizeable number of Conservative MPs, however, expressed embedded free trade preferences for structuration, making it the most contested semiotic element in the debates that we analysed. Mark Garnier (Conservative) called the CRaG process ‘completely meaningless.’¹¹³ Some Conservative MPs pointed to other democracies such as ‘Japan and the United States and the EU’ that give an active role to their parliaments in trade negotiations. They argued that this strengthens, rather than weakens the hand of negotiators, because it allows them ‘to hold red lines in negotiations.’¹¹⁴ Anthony Mangnall (Conservative) also expressed the view that ‘scrutiny ... is not to be feared. If anything, the expertise in this House would be of huge benefit to both the Government and the Department for International Trade.’¹¹⁵ Jonathan Djanogly (Conservatives) exposed the ‘bizarre reality [that] post-Brexit, the UK has given more powers to Ministers and has less accountability and scrutiny over its trade deals than when we were in the EU.’¹¹⁶

By November 2022, Conservative MPs and government members began distancing themselves from CRaG, highlighting that it ‘was introduced by the Labour government in 2010’¹¹⁷ and recalling that ‘CRaG was introduced by Labour.’¹¹⁸ By the autumn of 2022, the mood in UK Houses of Parliament was such that the Shadow Secretary could maintain that calls for greater parliamentary scrutiny are ‘very much a cross-party matter.’¹¹⁹ Parliamentary debates devoted to the scrutiny of trade agreements subsequently began in the Commons in October 2022.¹²⁰

While this shows that the cultural foundations of UK post-Brexit trade policy were very much in flux during the negotiation and ratification of the UK–Australia FTA, our cultural political economy analysis of UK parliamentary debates suggests that the FTA itself came into existence because specific political actors holding a competitive free trade imaginary put institutional structures in place that created maximum freedom for the government to negotiate as it saw fit, with minimal opportunity for parliament to scrutinise the ensuing agreement and no formal vote before its adoption. Those supporting the embedded free trade approach, including some Conservative representatives, by contrast sought to rebalance the relationship and enable greater parliamentary

¹⁰⁹ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 427.

¹¹⁰ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 138.

¹¹¹ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 138.

¹¹² Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 203.

¹¹³ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 155.

¹¹⁴ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 426.

¹¹⁵ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 434.

¹¹⁶ Hansard, 06/09/22, Col. 188.

¹¹⁷ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 435.

¹¹⁸ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 451.

¹¹⁹ Hansard, 14/11/22, Col. 420.

¹²⁰ Hansard, Vol. 720, Col. 146WH–164WH, 12/10/22; Hansard, Vol. 721, Col. 1050–6, 03/11/22.

scrutiny of the outcome of negotiations and their likely impact. The future of UK trade policy will in part hinge on how contestations over its cultural foundations will play out as decision-making powers shift within domestic politics, which will be in part constrained by third-party expectations created in UK concessions, given the UK–Australia precedent.

Conclusion

The UK's first fully fledged FTA negotiated post-Brexit provides an opportunity to assess the nature of the UK's new commercial policy direction and add to the emerging literature on this area. We began by noting the inadequacy of 'orthodox' approaches to understanding trade policymaking, notably the failures of the Open Economy Politics model to explain adequately either Brexit or the UK–Australia FTA, alongside the inability of approaches that have emphasised the symbolic and performative elements of UK trade policy to explain the content of the UK–Australia FTA, which we contend is more substantive than has often been argued. This article has employed a cultural political economy framework to complement these approaches, which sets out how four analytical elements – semiosis, technologies of government, structuration, and agency – interact to shape the UK's approach to post-Brexit trade policy and enable its implementation, using the UK–Australia FTA as our empirical focus. In particular, we have highlighted the role of culture as a process of contested meaning making in shaping trade policy, which sees material, political, and ideational/social elements of trade policymaking as co-constitutive elements of political economy.

Analysing UK parliamentary debates on the UK–Australia FTA, we found two competing visions of how free trade ought to be understood and enacted in the UK's trade policy post-Brexit. In the competitive free trade imaginary, the idea of competitiveness is central. At the semiotic/discursive level, it sees trade agreements and free trade as policy tools for increasing the level of competition within the UK economy, encouraging businesses and society to become more competitive. Under technologies of government, the competitive free trade imaginary reads the impact assessments of UK–Australia as proving the economic case for competitiveness and opts in favour of deregulatory and mutual-recognition-based techniques for safeguarding broader public policy goals. Within agency, competitiveness is the end that justifies the means taken by the Secretary of State to achieve it. Under structuration, the competitive free trade imaginary prefers restricted oversight from parliament over the executive branches of government.

In the embedded free trade imaginary, a perceived need for the state to play an active role in linking the economy and society is the central idea. At the semiotic level, it adopts an embedded liberal understanding of free trade, whereby the state compensates the losers of trade liberalisation and shapes trade policies in ways that mean trade can support non-trade public policy goals. The embedded free trade imaginary reads the impact assessments of UK–Australia as demonstrating the failure of competitive free trade and perceives international practice for safeguarding non-trade public policy goals as superior to the deregulatory approach taken in the UK–Australia deal. It sees the extraordinary agency of the Secretary of State as being curtailed by constitutional, procedural and moral standards. Under structuration, the embedded free trade imaginary prefers more active oversight of parliament over the executive.

We found that while all Conservative MPs in the House of Commons endorsed the competitive free trade imaginary on semiosis (that is, discourses of competitive free trade), a number of Conservative MPs adopted embedded free trade imaginaries on agency, technologies of government, and structuration. On structuration in particular, they heavily contested the Conservative government's way of achieving the adoption of UK–Australia based on embedded free trade ideals of effective parliamentary oversight. In terms of the UK's approach to the Australia FTA, we argued that a set of actors in the Conservative Party (i) employed discourses of competitive free trade; and used (ii) deregulatory governing technologies, (iii) their key power positions in UK government, and (iv) the UK's institutional and procedural void in trade policy following Brexit, in order to pursue a competitive free trade agenda via the UK–Australia agreement. Their competitive free

trade imaginary was unsuccessfully challenged by a competing, embedded free trade imaginary prevalent among opposition parties in the House of Commons and in the House of Lords, and among a small number of Conservative MPs. Overall, our analysis indicates that the cultural foundations of UK trade policy were not fully established during UK–Australia parliamentary debates and can be expected to remain contested within UK politics, warranting future (cultural) political economy investigation. Further policy developments around structuration in particular may be significant in reorienting the UK's approach to post-Brexit trade policy.

The regaining of trade policy autonomy following Brexit presents an extraordinary event in economic policymaking, and the general implications of our study for the political economy of trade in ordinary times may be limited by this fact. Nonetheless, we have suggested a cultural political economy framework for trade policy that provides insights into how power is exercised through meaning making in times of uncertainty and change in political economy. This has, perhaps, never been more pertinent, with multiple aspects of the current commercial landscape in flux: the challenges of climate change, various trade conflicts, and the collapse of multilateralism being three notable examples. Cultural political economy approaches may investigate the political economy underlying these and other trade governance challenges and, in doing so, advance theoretical pluralism within the field of international trade studies, which has long been dominated by liberal and institutionalist approaches.

This pluralism is all the more pertinent as the trade arena is increasingly recognised as intersecting with international cooperation and policymaking around a wide range of policy issues, from development, corporate governance, and finance, via health, environment, and labour, to human rights, social inequality, and democracy. Alternative discourses to the traditional free trade vs. protection dichotomy, such as green trade, geopolitical trade, or inclusive trade, are gaining traction in global trade politics and are ripe for cultural political economy exploration. In further crystallising and pursuing a cultural political economy of trade research agenda, future research may critically engage the economic imaginaries driving these developments and support the search for progressive alternatives to dominant economic imaginaries of trade policy.

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