

BRUSSELS'S BURDEN

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**BRUSSELS'S BURDEN:
(UN)MAKING THE GLOBAL SOUTHS IN
THE EUROPEAN UNION'S
PREFERENTIAL TRADE POLICY**

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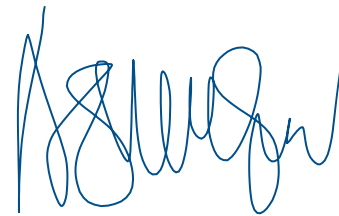
Declaration

This dissertation draws solely on my own work except where I have clearly cited the work of others. No parts of this doctoral research have been accepted for any other degrees in any other universities. I have adapted the text in sub-chapters 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 on ‘The Brussels Effect’ and ‘Exporting norms through trade’ from essays I submitted for the *Research in Regional Integration and Global Governance* course at Central European University in the Academic Year 2019/20.

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This dissertation consists of 109,015 words, including the footnotes, annexes, and bibliography.

All lapses remain mine and mine alone.



Antonio Salvador M. Alcazar III

Bogotá, 13 August 2024

Abstract

As a trade power, the European Union sees itself as a benevolent partner of the global souths. Often feted as the crown jewel of the EU's common commercial policy is the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP). Since 1971, GSP has liberalised the European single market to exports from the global souths without asking market access concessions in return. Not to be conflated with free trade, this one-sided opening purports to benefit so-called 'developing' countries—especially the 'vulnerable' and the 'most in need'—by plucking people out of poverty through the workings of preferential trade. At the same time, the trade policy establishment in Brussels is busying itself with the pursuit of not only commerce but commerce attached to global norms, as opposed to parochial EU ones. Under GSP, the EU entices partner countries to live up to their obligations towards international conventions on human rights, labour standards, good governance, and environmental protection.

Yet this partnership discourse obscures how trade encounters between the EU and its presumed others in world politics have been, and continue to be, entrenched in colonial/modern relations. Sitting at odds with common-sensical neoliberal and normative beliefs, this tension compels us to re-read the EU's entanglements with those deemed to be on the peripheries of the global economic order. In this context, I ask: How are the global souths imagined in the EU's preferential trade policy discourses? Grounded in decolonial and interpretive ways of knowing, I contend that the GSP regime discursively constitutes the global souths as sites to be ordered, governed, and intervened by the EU-self.

In making these knowledge claims, this dissertation prioritises a methodological orientation of studying policy upwards. Drawing on extensive archival research, policy documents, and 65 semi-structured interviews with trade policy elites through fieldwork in Brussels, I engage with policy ethnography to interrogate those who are in positions of power and responsible for the (re)production of GSP. While entrusting itself in interpretivism, this work pushes the critique of policy further by making more legible how GSP reincarnates coloniality. By inferiorising the targets of GSP into a perpetually sorry state of becoming, neediness, and vulnerability, the EU encodes the global souths into colonial/modern logics of Eurocentrism, hierarchies, and

intervention. These regimes of meanings, then, replicate the necessary presence of the EU-self for its presumed others to ‘strive a little more’ and ‘behave better’. Crucially, I implicate GSP into coloniality to counter celebrated EU discourses of ‘interdependence’, ‘global governance’, and ‘international partnerships’. This imperative upends scholarly, historical and political imaginaries about GSP and—in the end—*ethically* commits to emancipatory politics anchored in concrete sites of struggles in GSP-dependent economies on the outskirts of a world order far from being ‘post-colonial’.

Dedication

Para sa Buhi sagkād ki Y.B.

Acknowledgements

Writing differently in European Studies and political science, from a decolonial epistemic location and global souths social location, is no easy feat; saying this is an understatement. The critique I flesh out in this dissertation would have been left unwritten were it not for the backing and wager of many. Chief among them is my supervisor Thilo Bodenstein whose consistent support and generous guidance throughout my doctoral studies at CEU have kept me and my research project going. I am also greatly indebted to Daniel Large and Agnes Batory as members of my supervision panel. Altogether, their critical feedback has kept me grounded and helped shape the contours of this dissertation. While we may not always see eye-to-eye on certain ontological and epistemological grounds, there is no doubt their intellectual advice and points of view have challenged how I think and sharpened my writing for the better. I value their supervision. To CEU, I am grateful for the doctoral scholarship and financial aid that sustained this project. I cannot thank Cristina, Eszter, Ingy, Kriszta, Michael, Monica, and Zoli enough for their kindness and support throughout my four-year stay at the Doctoral School. My thanks also to Julia for discussing my work at a research seminar for the Department of Public Policy.

This project would not exist without the contributions of many outside CEU. First of all, I appreciate the time and thoughts of my interlocutors in Brussels. As a field, Brussels has been full of contradictions, impenetrable at times, and often frustratingly Eurocentric, yet also incredibly helpful, open to entertaining thorny questions, and willing to meet me halfway. I have no license to name all 60+ EU trade policy people I interviewed, but they will never go un-thanked. I have also benefited as a visiting research fellow at Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals. My thanks in particular go to Andrea Bianculli and Carlos Sánchez for making my stay at IBEI a welcoming and fruitful one, not least with the opportunity to present my work at a joint meeting of the *Globalization and Public Policy* and *Norms and Rules in International Politics* research clusters. I would also like to acknowledge receiving a travel bursary for 'doing essential fieldwork in European Studies' from the University Association for Contemporary European Studies. This financial support prolonged the time I could afford to stay and do fieldwork in Brussels.

Sans any formal training in the craft of historians, I am grateful to the staff at the Historical Archives of the European Commission in Brussels for accommodating my research visits. In

making sense of GSP historically, I owe my clarity of thought in part to the Postcolonial Hierarchies Workshop at the 10th European Workshops in International Studies in Amsterdam. I thank Siddharth, Anna, and Elena for including me in the workshop, Viviana and Alke for helpfully discussing my work, and the European International Studies Association for supporting my participation.

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The photographic cover of this thesis depicts a marketplace in Manila. Credits are due to NIC LAW's 'Photo of Crowd of People in the Market' (LAW 2017).

Finally, to Y.B., you've been an unfailing muse more than you know. *Slava Ukraini!*

Antonio Salvador M. Alcazar III
Bangkok · Barcelona · Bogotá
August 2023 and 2024

Notes on translation, language, and references

My sources from the Historical Archives of the European Commission are overwhelmingly in French. In Chapters 3 and 4, I use my own English translation of French-language texts whenever I quote directly from them. I provide the original passage in footnotes.

As in any other aspect of EU policymaking, endless acronyms populate the ‘GSP-verse’. I have deliberately shied away from using too many acronyms, even though they are quite normalised in the folk language of my local interlocutors in Brussels. Here, I prioritise better readability over lexical economy.

Throughout the thesis, I use Generalised Scheme of Preferences, generalised preferences, GSP, GSP policy, GSP regime, preferential trade policy, preferential tariffs, trade preferences, tariff preferences, and preferential market access interchangeably. I employ these terms whenever speaking about the EU’s preferential trade policy towards the global souths as a whole. Standard GSP, GSP+, and the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative are three sub-variants under the EU’s GSP policy (for now it is worth pointing these distinctions out; I treat them at length in Chapters 5 and 6). I invoke these terms when I refer to specific GSP contexts.

Since this thesis depends heavily on intertextual work, I have carefully distinguished between the types of evidence I am mobilising. Apart from the author-date format, I cite interviews and policy documents by using unique references and alphanumeric codes. For example, I weave in-text ‘Interview 11’ referring to an interview I had with so-and-so or ‘EC2’ referring to a specific European Commission document. All corresponding data sources are listed in the annexes. When citing materials from the historical archives, I use footnotes because they are the most convenient and reader-facing way to marshal my sources and better aligned with citational practices of historians.

In all cases, I aim for a friendlier prose.

Acronyms

AASM	Associated African States and Malagasy
ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific group of states
AGOA	African Growth and Opportunity Act
DCTS	Developing Countries Trading Scheme
DG	Directorate-General
EBA	Everything But Arms
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
G77	Group of 77
GATT	General Agreement on Tariff and Trade
GSP	Generalised Scheme of Preferences
ILO	International Labour Organisation
NIEO	New International Economic Order
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
US	United States of America
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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*Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught sullen peoples,
Half devil and half child.*

—Excerpt from 'The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands' by
Rudyard Kipling (1899)

Introduction: Critiquing the EU as a global (trade) power

You should be thankful the Philippines is not an Everything But Arms beneficiary. This puzzled me. The European official saying this to me rather candidly in a tête-à-tête did not make any sense to me. The year was 2013. We were sat in a corporate boardroom in one of the high-rise buildings sprawling the skyscraper-filled, highly urbanised Makati central business district—only a stone’s throw away from the Delegation of the European Union to the Philippines. We were gearing up for another committee meeting on trade and investment issues considered important by the European business community in the archipelago. High on our agenda at the European chamber of commerce was the application of the Philippines to ‘upgrade’ its trading relations with the EU under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP). Back then, the Aquino Administration had been working together with the foreign and domestic private sector towards the highly coveted GSP+ status as part of the broader ‘inclusive growth’ story we kept telling each other and the Filipino people.¹ Compared to the standard GSP, GSP+ would offer more tariff breaks on more products for Philippine enterprises exporting to the EU. The catch? The Philippine state shall succumb to Brussels’s scrutiny and respect international norms on human rights, labour standards, good governance, and environmental protection.

Ten years ago, this philosophy behind GSP+ seemed quite unproblematic to my younger, more neoliberal self who used to believe in the mechanisms of the market unquestionably and their inextricable role in development. It seemed rational to me as someone working as a policy and advocacy officer for a European business outfit in a so-called ‘developing’ country. From Manila’s perspective, there was a strong commercial case to be made about joining GSP+ since the country would not be obliged to slash tariffs on EU imports in return. Not only that, GSP+ aligned so well with the *Daang Matuwid* (literally ‘upright path’) discourse of the Aquino presidency, which had risen to power on an anti-corruption and good governance ticket. Seen from Brussels, GSP+ glistened with its stated policy aims of promoting development and incentivising more trade with

¹ See: GSP Privileges For Tuna Perilled, <https://www.eccp.com/articles/266>; PHL exports to Europe expected to rise by 20%, <https://www.eccp.com/articles/524>; Phl must stand out from regional competition to attract more investments from EU, <https://www.eccp.com/articles/818>; EU urges Philippines companies to maximize GSP+ scheme, <https://www.philstar.com/business/2015/09/25/1503904/eu-urges-philippines-companies-maximize-gsp-scheme>; PHL manufacturing, agri big winners in EU trade under GSP+ tariff rates, <https://www.eccp.com/articles/870>; PHL manufacturing, agri big winners in EU zero-tariff, <https://www.eccp.com/articles/873>.

‘developing’ countries. In other words, it promised a win-win situation for strengthening Philippines–EU trade ties.

Yet, in theory, I could not comprehend how benefiting under the Everything But Arms scheme could possibly be injurious to Philippine interests. In a neoliberal sense, this scheme would practically mean unfettered export opportunities for the Philippines. Our exporters could send virtually all products, save armaments, to the EU at zero tariffs and zero quotas. On top of having this tariff advantage, our import-competing businesses would remain shielded from unwanted competition with EU firms because reciprocity is, in principle and under international law, not built into the architecture of GSP. What is more, our government would not be legally obliged to shoulder the costs of mixing trade and non-trade issues vis-à-vis the EU. In short, and rationally speaking, the scheme exemplified the best possible scenario the Philippines could ever hope for in its trading relations with the EU (at least in my mind, then).

Research question and the problem with the Generalised Scheme of Preferences

Years passed, and I would come to read the interpretive moment I encountered in Manila ten years ago differently. Of course, the frank EU diplomat made sense from a Eurocentric epistemic location. Of course, being awarded a GSP+ status would mean that, from an EU point of view, the Philippines would be lifting itself up and getting more ahead than those considered to be the ‘most in need’, but not quite there yet to conclude a free trade agreement with the EU as ‘equals’. The earlier ethnographic glitch, then, fundamentally points to a question of meaning-making. Outside positivist thinking, we would see more clearly how the EU inscribes a particular ensemble of meanings to GSP, which shapes, and is shaped by, particular constellations of political relations in the world. As a policy, GSP produces and reproduces hierarchical relations of power not only between the EU and its presumed others in world politics, but also between its presumed others themselves.

In this context, this dissertation fixates on the following central research question: **How are the global souths imagined in the EU’s preferential trade policy discourses?** Before placing GSP in conversation with broader questions about power and order in world politics, let us unpack the

thinking behind this research question first. By asking a *how* question, I take no interest in tracing any causal mechanism linking dependent and independent variables to explain a given social or political phenomenon as in orthodox political science research. Rather, I gravitate towards explicating ‘how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects and objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions that create certain possibilities and preclude others’ (Doty 1996, 4).

Problematically, official EU discourse presents GSP as a mode of ‘trade partnerships’ with the global souths. In the latest joint policy report on GSP by the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, GSP is emphasised as a policy that ‘brings the EU closer to its partners based on shared values’ (EC47). This partnership discourse has permeated my lived experience of the policy in the Philippines, during fieldwork in Brussels, and throughout the research process. Yet contradicting this ostensible partnership discourse is language that, for instance, gazes at the supposed beneficiaries of GSP as ‘children’ needing to behave, be disciplined, go to school, and grow up (Interviews 11, 36, 41, 42; EP10) or as ‘greyhounds’ competing for access to European markets.² How could the EU mean to regard GSP beneficiaries as ‘partners’ while in the same breath infantilise and dehumanise them? This discursive tension is brought to light through ‘the juxtaposition of the analyst’s “estrangement” from the analytical situation and her growing familiarity with that situation’ (Yanow 2000, 9–10). This generative back-and-forth between my ‘estrangement’ from GSP and heightened familiarity with the policy throughout the research process has demanded ‘an attitude of doubt’ (Yanow 2014b, 9) to interrogate GSP and the EU’s meaning-making about the global souths.

By critiquing GSP and its more intensified entanglements with fundamental international conventions, I am by no means denigrating those conventions. Rather, what I find problematic about GSP relates to *how* the EU subordinates the global souths to a position where EU presence is normalised as a necessary condition for the global souths to fulfil their international obligations towards the global political and economic order that happens to be Eurocentric. In other words,

² HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 327, Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General for External Relations, Session of European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15 November 1979, Speaking Notes on report and draft opinion by Mr Andrew PEARCE on the proposals for the EC’s 1980 GSP Scheme.

the problem is that the EU's official worldview of GSP camouflages certain logics that sustain relations based on colonial difference: the wretched, ungovernable others need the benevolent EU-self to trade their way out of poverty and better themselves as adherents of the global order. Critiquing GSP, then, means 'grounding its analyses and interpretations in alternative sites of struggle and knowledge production' (Fúnez-Flores 2023, 8).

By invoking the 'global souths', I intentionally distance myself from the promiscuous and problematic usage of 'developing' and 'least developed' countries in EU trade policy technospeak. The language of global souths signals my own reflexive practice of addressing the EU's others in another way. Of course, the more recognisable 'Global South' is an amorphous concept. Some trace its conceptual lineage directly to the Cold War notion of the 'Third World'³ (Mignolo 2011a; Sajed 2020). In a related sense, the Global South denotes the sites of anti-imperial struggles of the South (peripheries) against the North (centres). Here, the peripheries pertain to anti-imperial struggles not only in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but also presumably Russia and the former Soviet Union (Amin 2019). Yet this conceptualisation crumbles at once in the face of Russia's imperial war against Ukraine and the imbrication of post-socialist countries in Western hegemony today, not least through the EU integration project. Beyond facile geographical connotations and hemispheric boundaries, the Global South has also been conceptualised as a subversive practice through which alternative ways of knowing are fostered from historically marginalised, subaltern(ised) positionalities (Kloß 2017). I resonate most with this interpretation as it does not replicate problematic binaries or imperial geographies. As a subversive practice, the Global South compels us to take seriously marginalised subject-positions in the politics of knowledge. In the same vein, Tripathi (2021) distinguishes between Global South (without scare quotes) and 'Global South' (with scare quotes). For Tripathi, the former denotes a state-centric category comprised of formerly colonised countries whereas the latter refers to an epistemological commitment to overcoming epistemic hierarchies in the politics of knowledge production. In this sense, the 'Global South' may be interpreted as an 'epistemic location' as opposed to a 'social location' (Grosfoguel 2007). Although one is socially situated in the Global South, it does not necessarily

³ From here onwards, I will do away with the scare quotes without meaning to flatten how the language of the 'Third World' is deeply enmeshed in hierarchical power relations and colonial thinking. At the same time, it is important to note that invoking the Third World can also speak to reclaiming political agency in a generative or emancipatory sense, e.g., in the context of Third World Approaches to International Law.

mean that they are thinking from a subversive epistemic location. Indeed, it is important to underline that ‘the success of the modern/colonial world-system consists in making subjects that are socially located in the oppressed side of the colonial difference, to think epistemically like the ones on the dominant positions’ (Grosfoguel 2007, 213). Building on this, however, I choose to write the concept in lower case and in plural form so as not to suggest a homogenised view of southernness or otherness. This is so because, as we shall see, the EU itself has differentiated between its supposed others in trade policy, past and present, thereby betraying the stability in meaning evoked by terms like the ‘Global South’, ‘Third World’, or ‘developing world’.

Hence, my choice of verb: imagine. The global souths are not fixed social and political entities; they are in flux, contested, made, negotiated, unmade, or reconstituted by ever-shifting constellations of policy actors and political institutions. They are the peoples and places that have been and are deemed ‘less developed’ by the EU-self and, therefore, need external intervention. Although the global souths are implicated in other facets of EU common commercial policy, this dissertation concentrates on the GSP regime as an empirical anchor and, where applicable, its connections to free trade agreements and other unilateral trade policy measures. I emphasise the ‘GSP-verse’ because it is through which the EU governs its commercial and political relations with those considered to be on the margins of the global capitalist order (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). Currently, GSP targets 65 countries around the world. In 2022, GSP preferential imports amounted to a total of €80.6 billion, up from €56.2 billion and €52.7 billion in 2021 and 2020, respectively. These imports mainly involve the apparel, machinery, footwear, and agri-food sectors (EC47; EC48).

Last but not least, I am invested in interrogating discourses by the EU about the global souths. By discourses, I refer to the regimes of meaning attached to the global souths by policymakers, bureaucrats, parliamentarians, scholars, historical archives, businesspeople, civil society organisations, and other relevant policy actors speaking from EU or EU-centred perspectives. Thinking critically about discourses and the political relations they make possible (and sustain) denaturalises the ways in which GSP has normalised the global souths as ‘beneficiaries’ under EU *preferential* trade policy. Etymologically, *preferential* evokes the idea of placing something or someone before others in regard or esteem. The adjective directly traces its root from the Latin

praeferre, meaning ‘to place or set before’ or ‘carry in front’, from *prae* meaning ‘before’ and *ferre* meaning ‘to carry’ or ‘to bear’.⁴ In other words, EU trade policy places, or bears the brunt of, the global souths before others through GSP. Yet the preferential framing of GSP already sets the EU’s others as ‘beneficiaries’ and forecloses other political interpretations. As such, I prefer the language of GSP ‘targets’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 10) to make explicit the structural relations of power wherein the EU objectifies the global souths as entities to be altered and reformed through the workings of GSP. Being interested in discourses, then, means being interested in questions about power and worldmaking.

Coloniality and world ordering through GSP

‘Europe is a garden. [...] Most of the rest of the world is a jungle. [...] The gardeners have to go to the jungle. Europeans have to be much more engaged with the world. Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us by different ways and means’, says His Excellency Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of ‘a stronger Europe in the world’ (EC35).

Owing to its market prowess, the EU sees itself, as it were, as a ‘gardener’ of globalisation. In part due to multilateral inertia and contentious politics against unfettered trade, the EU has unflinchingly charted an external trade agenda that goes beyond traditional tariff liberalisation and market access. By virtue of its ‘new generation’ common commercial policy, the EU is today often thought to be asserting its market power in external relations (Damro 2012; Young and Peterson 2014; Damro 2015). Of late, scholars argue that the EU has more increasingly leveraged trade in pursuit of high politics, i.e., to achieve ‘geopolitical’ and ‘gocioeconomic’ ends (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Olsen 2022). In their latest joint report on the GSP, the European Commission and the European External Action Service stress that GSP ensures stability amidst multiple crises ‘threatening the global economy’ (EC48). They maintain that ‘the availability of preferential exports to the EU provides a crucial element of stability for fragile economies as it helped GSP countries to continue exporting’ against the backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic and Russia’s war

⁴ https://www.etymonline.com/word/preferential#etymonline_v_33507

against Ukraine, which have both aggravated energy, debt, food, and cost-of-living crises globally in recent years (EC47).

Through political conditionalities and economic sanctions, the EU also exploits trade to influence politics elsewhere, i.e., in the ‘jungle’, in the name of democracy, good governance, human rights, labour standards, and sustainable development, especially in its affairs with ‘problematic’ trading partners deemed to be flouting these norms. In the words of ex-trade commissioner Cecilia Malmström, this epitomises the European model of trying to ‘dialogue, influence, and push’ norm-breakers in the EU’s external relations (EC2). Prefacing the European Commission’s recent communication on ‘The power of trade partnerships: together for green and just economic growth’, trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovkis declares: ‘We will step up our enforcement, and we will resort to sanctions if key labour and climate commitments are not met’ (EC43; EC44). In this light, GSP today is lauded as ‘the crown jewel of European trade policy because it tries to link poor countries into the world economy and lift them out of poverty [...] [and] grants additional preferences to those countries that *strive a little more and try to behave better*’ (EP10; emphasis added). In other words, the EU entraps GSP targets ‘into a perpetual state of *becoming*’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014, 197).

As the ‘crown jewel’ of EU common commercial policy, GSP operates as a particular way of sustaining economic and political orders in global politics. From an EU perspective, GSP symbolises international partnerships through which the EU fosters development in places deemed to be in dire need of it. On paper, GSP claims to be doing so by integrating the global souths in global value chains and alleviating poverty through economic gains stemming from better export opportunities. Nevertheless, carrot-and-stick discourses persist, thus betraying the notion of international partnerships in trade. Since the Global Strategy of 2016 and the Trade Policy Review of 2021, the EU has more openly emphasised ‘the language of enforcement, the language of enforceability, the language of coercion, and the language of assertiveness’ within the GSP regime (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023, 198). Should GSP targets fail to acquiesce to normative demands by the EU in respecting international norms, they run the risk of losing their special status as the EU’s ‘preferred’ trading partners.

Such is Brussels's burden. The alliterative title of this dissertation, of course, alludes to *The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands*, an infamous (or famous, depending on one's persuasions) poem penned by British novelist and poet Rudyard Kipling. Originally published in 1899, the poem urged the United States (US) to emulate Britain and other Western European powers in shouldering the 'burden' of imperialism overseas. In the aftermath of the Spanish–American War, the 1898 Treaty of Paris formally ended 333 years of Spanish colonialism in the Philippine Islands, which subsequently fell under US control alongside Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Guam. And so, the US gained its first colonial subjects overseas and, for Kipling, ought to step up in dutiful 'service' to so-called 'new-caught, sullen peoples, half devil and half child', referring to the peoples of the Philippine Islands. In this sense, Kipling used the racialised notion of the 'white man', as understood in the US context at the time, 'as a term of commendation, meaning straight or decent' (Hamer 2009). In other words, for Kipling, the burden of imperialism ultimately served humanitarian ends: to enlighten and civilise other lands and peoples through colonialism.⁵ Despite the different historical and geopolitical context of Kipling's poem, I invoke the language of 'burden' here to stress its continuing political relevance across time and contexts (Hirono 2008; Zielonka 2013), not least when it comes to contemporary EU external relations through which the colonial/modern logic of 'civilising missions' lives on, such as in development, trade, or migration policies (e.g., Rutazibwa 2010; Vergès 2011; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023).

Let us not mince words here. GSP reincarnates (Western) Europe's civilising mission under a different garb: coloniality. As a way of seeing the world, coloniality forces us to think through the persistence of civilisational, economic, epistemic, gendered and racialised hierarchies today despite the formal closure of colonialism (Quijano 2000a, 2000b, 2007; Lugones 2007; Ndlovu-

⁵ Following Go (2016), imperialism is often understood as the exercise of control over one society by another society. However, this control does not necessarily imply the exertion of direct political control. Imperialism can take the form of indirect political control (e.g., China's contemporary ten-dash-line expansionism in maritime Southeast Asia), economic control (e.g., Roman Empire's stranglehold over Ancient Egypt's trade and economy), or cultural control (e.g., the displacement of indigenous languages by the English language in the Philippines via US imperialism). In the context of Kipling's poem advocating for the spread of US imperialism to Spain's ex-colonies in the West and East Indies, colonialism may be understood as 'a more specific variant of imperialism, referring to a situation whereby control is exerted directly and for a sustained duration of time. The ruling power officially declares political control over another territory and its people and institutionalizes the control through declarations of law. The colonized country is then a part of the mother country but subordinate to it' (Go 2016, 1).

Gatsheni 2014). Peruvian sociologist and political theorist Aníbal Quijano conceptualises coloniality as:

one of the constitutive and specific elements of the global mode of capitalist power. It is rooted in the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population as the cornerstone of the said mode of power and operates in each of the levels, areas and dimensions, material and subjective, of daily social existence and on a societal scale. (Quijano 2000b, 342, my translation)

As a way of organising the world, coloniality entangles both symbolic and material modes of subordination within a modern world order deeply moored in the histories of European colonialism and the various forms of racism, violence, erasure, dependency, settlement, dispossession, exploitation, displacement, and deaths those histories entailed in the past and continue to inflict today (see, for example, Rodney 1972; Escobar 1995; Rutazibwa 2010; Sabaratnam 2013; Shilliam 2013; Hansen and Jonsson 2014; Sabaratnam 2017; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018; Langan 2018; Haastrup 2020; Langan and Price 2020a; Langan and Price 2020b; Sebhatu 2020; Shilliam 2021). In decolonial thought, coloniality has emerged within a specific social-historical context through the European 'discovery' and colonisation of the Americas. It is in this context that global capitalist modes of economic relations organised around the notion of racialised hierarchies between European and non-European peoples 'became tied with forms of domination and subordination that were central to maintaining colonial control first in the Americas, and then elsewhere' (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243). For this reason, central to decolonial thought is the coloniality/modernity thesis: that the Eurocentric notion of a modern world order has been, and continues to be, deeply entwined with coloniality. Modernity, for Quijano, refers to '[the] intersubjective universe produced by the entire Eurocentered capitalist power [...] as a universal paradigm of knowledge and of the relation between humanity and the rest of the world' (Quijano 2007, 171–2). Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel explicates:

Coloniality and modernity constitute two sides of a single coin. The same way as the European industrial revolution was achieved on the shoulders of the coerced forms of labor in the periphery, the new identities, rights, laws, and institutions of modernity such as nation-states, citizenship and democracy were formed in a process of colonial interaction with, and domination/exploitation of, non-Western people. (Grosfoguel 2007, 218)

Importantly, 'colonialism' and 'coloniality', though related, are not xeroxes of each other. The former relates to a 'flag-planting moment' in history with a discernible beginning and an end,

which, for many, transpired in the 20th century. The latter points to an ordering of global power relations that comes with an enduring set of institutions to preserve those power relations both during and beyond the ‘flag-planting moment’ (Rutazibwa 2020a). In other words, colonialism pertains to ‘the direct political control of a society and its people by a foreign ruling state’ (Go 2016, 1) wherein the colonising power subordinates the colonised society and its people often through racial, ethnic, economic, legal, military, cultural, religious, social and other forms of domination. Coloniality is a set of enduring worldviews and power structures rationalising and sustaining such colonial/modern forms of domination both within and outside colonialism in our world today. As Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres elucidates:

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday. (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 243)

The Eurocentric notion of modernity understood both ‘as a discourse and as a practice would not be possible without coloniality, and coloniality continues to be an inevitable outcome of modern discourses’ (ibid., 244). Not to be conflated, then, with colonialism as most people know it, coloniality ‘produces a kind of “common sense” about the modern world, in which the West emerges as an either fortunate or deserving historical genius, which rationalises and justifies its subordination of the rest of the world in political and economic terms’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 142). By way of GSP, the EU subordinates the global souths into a paternalistic and dependent relationship wherein the presumed other owes its ‘development’ invariably to the benevolent EU-self and its market largesse. To be clear, I am not reading GSP through the lens of neocolonialism and postcolonialism, which I shall justify later in this introduction. Rather, I contend GSP is imbricated in discourses that, even after formal colonialism, structure colonial/modern relations of power between a ‘developed’ EU and its perpetually ‘developing’ others. To see things this way warrants, in the vernacular of Pilipino historiography, a politics of ‘counter-consciousness’ to escape the colonial mentality that still strangulates the (inter-)subjective relations of colonised peoples today (Constantino 1970).

Such a different frame of reference, however, sits at odds with the neoliberal and normative beliefs held dearly by the EU trade policy establishment about GSP. On the one hand, a neoliberal interpretation rationalises that GSP benefits less industrialised countries by grooming them to conclude free trade agreements with the EU in future (Interviews 1; 2; 9; 13; 17; 19; 24; 37; 39; 54; 60; 63). A staunch exponent of neoliberal economic restructuring globally, the World Bank, however, cautioned in the 1980s that generalised preferences were a ‘Faustian bargain’ bound to harm freer trade:

It has been suggested that by accepting special and differential treatment the developing countries have struck a Faustian bargain. In exchange for preferences, which brought them limited and risky gains, they have given up a voice in reciprocal trade negotiations and left themselves open to attack by protectionists in the industrial countries, who accuse them of unfair trade. (World Bank 1987, 167)

That said, the relationship between GSP and neoliberalism is a nuanced one if, in the context of trade policy, we view neoliberalism as the imperative to shield capital from arbitrary state/political control and to pursue mutual trade liberalisation with foreign markets (De Ville and Orbie 2014, 151). GSP defies the most-favoured-nation norm as one of the foundations of the liberal world trading order. *GSP is not free trade per se, although, in time, it slants towards mutual trade liberalisation.* It is a one-sided opening until the intended users of GSP are deemed ‘mature’ enough to embrace reciprocity in terms of conceding market access in return to the EU. In other words: freer trade and ‘ever greater liberalisation’.⁶

On the other hand, a normative interpretation would have us believe that GSP exists not to serve the EU’s neoliberal trade agenda *per se*, but to ‘export’ social norms and progressive values on top of economic development through trade. As a flagship of the EU’s normative trade agenda, GSP is either irrelevant to, or delinked from, the history of European colonialism, unlike the bloc’s post-colonial trade arrangements or free trade agreements with ex-colonies, as some policy elites in Brussels insist (Interviews 22; 30; 32; 34). In the past, colonialism exploited trade violently

⁶ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, M. Gaspari’s note to Sir Christopher Soames, Commission Vice-President, 27 February 1975, Our communication about the future development of the EEC GSP – Council meeting on 3 and 4 March 1975.

without human rights. Nowadays, GSP supposedly champions trade with human rights (Interview 22). As a unilateral instrument in the service of others, not the EU-self, GSP+ exacts political conditionalities that target countries themselves have voluntarily agreed to be legally bound by (Interviews 15; 33; 36; 45). Therefore, the EU apparently possesses every right to unilaterally impose conditions and obligations on GSP targets. Following this line of reasoning, how could the EU be possibly colonial when GSP upholds international conventions, not explicitly EU norms (Interviews 34; 46)?

One of the remarkable silences or evasions in the EU's contemporary policy discourses on GSP is the complicity of GSP in colonial/modern relations. For instance, GSP has been 'forced onto us' since acceding to the EU, declares one trade diplomat from a member state without any formal colonies in the past and, by extension, without historical preferential trade relations with ex-colonies as opposed to other EU member states that were or are colonial/modern powers (Interview 17). Maria Arena, Socialists & Democrats member and former chair of the Sub-committee on Human Rights at the European Parliament, explicitly links GSP to Europe's colonial pasts and to the ongoing unequal exchange of sucking raw materials from the global souths for productive transformation in the single market:

Historically with some countries, not with all countries, but historically with some countries, we say that this tool is to support development in some countries, but in most of the cases this tool of GSP was a post-colonial tool. It was also to guarantee that after the independence of some countries, we, as Europeans, continue to receive the raw materials coming from these countries without having to pay tax. [laughing] We have to have that in mind because sometimes Europeans are just saying that GSP is a gift for these least developed countries. In fact, it is not a gift to them. It is a gift to us to guarantee that all these raw materials are entering Europe without tax to be transformed in Europe. [laughing] This is really something that we have to say also to be fair on this mechanism. (Interview 22)

Rarely does one hear these reflections straight from EU trade officials in public. Unfortunately, the political framings of EU trade policy through received neoliberal and normative presuppositions thwart attempts to see GSP, otherwise:

Before, we had an 'ethical' trade policy under Cecilia Malmström, a more interest-driven one under Karel De Gucht, a more ethical one again in terms of harnessing globalisation under Pascal Lamy, and a more interest-driven, neoliberal one under Sir Leon Brittan. We might speak of a kind of pendulum oscillating between values and interests, values and interests. This pendulum is

superficial because it distracts attention from something more fundamental, relatively constant, relatively unchangeable: coloniality. (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023, 198)

By re-reading GSP through the lens of coloniality, this dissertation is primarily aimed at the decolonial and interpretive scholarships in European Studies, with a focus on EU external trade relations. Empirically, it is delimited to the study of discourses about the global souths in and through the GSP regime as the ‘crown jewel’ of EU trade policy. By entering into a generative conversation between decolonial and interpretive ways of knowing, the thesis contributes to EU trade policy scholarship, more particularly, and to global souths-facing approaches to European Studies, more generally, in at least three ways. First, I articulate a counter-discourse to taken-for-granted scholarly, historical and political imaginaries about ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ societies in EU external trade relations. In methodological terms, this counter-discourse complicates how we think critically about generalised preferences within a growing body of interpretive writings on EU trade policy (Bollen 2018; Jacobs and Orbie 2020; Oleart 2021; Nessel and Verhaeghe 2022). In particular, studying Brussels upwards as a field overcomes the conventional focus on policy documents in (critical) discourse analysis, which is often delinked from deliberately questioning the ‘C-word’. It helps expose implicit meanings about GSP and render them more explicit through ethnographic immersion. I cannot stress this point enough especially since unmasking the coloniality of EU trade policy discourses is often de-emphasised or neglected altogether by extant trade policy scholarship within the Critical European Studies project (Jacobs and Orbie 2020) and a ground-breaking handbook on interpretive approaches to EU policies (Bollen 2018).⁷ Taking the time, then, to talk to policy elites behind the (re)production of GSP fosters thicker descriptions and more rigorous interpretations. This methodological posture aligns with a politics of refusal that repositions the ethnographic gaze from the oppressed towards the powers-that-be who are complicit in inflicting colonial/modern harms and structures in our world today (Tuck and Yang 2014). In the wider context of disrupting European Studies, this refusal exemplifies that ‘one can remain in Europe to study Europe and still [...] step away from Eurocentrism’ (David et al. 2023, 154) without, of course, precluding the more demanding imperative of shifting the geography of knowledge-making away from Europe.

⁷ I thank Jan Orbie for helping me not miss the forest for the trees, here.

None of this ethnographic emphasis on the EU, however, intends to replicate the Eurocentrism my work strives to defy. Quite the contrary, it places interpretivism in a generative conversation with knowledges from the global souths that take interrogating colonial relations in the past, present, and future seriously. That is, I demonstrate empirically how asymmetric relations of power operate in and through GSP as a particular creature of the ‘colonial global economy’ in recognition of the centrality of colonialism to the constitution and expansion of the contemporary global economic order (Bhambra 2021a). In doing so, the critique I develop here comes into dialogue with other interpretive communities that question the complicity of policy and policy studies in maintaining colonial/modern relations. In public policy, for example, critical scholars are today increasingly engaging with decolonial theory and praxis in the critique of policy, including the regulation of data, trade, and global value chains (Boullosa and Paul 2023; Mason, Partzsch, and Kramarz 2023). In European Studies, alternative spaces are being (re)claimed for decolonial, neocolonial and postcolonial perspectives on different EU policy areas, such as law (Solanke 2022), trade (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023), climate (Vela Almeida et al. 2023), security (Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021; Merlingen 2023), migration (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2018), integration (Hansen and Jonsson 2014), development (Langan 2018; Rutazibwa 2010; Orbie 2021; Langan 2023), and external relations, especially with Africa (Staeger 2016; Haastrup 2020; Sebhatu 2020; Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021). Thus, a second key contribution my dissertation makes is to this growing corpus of knowledges on the EU outside the archive of Eurocentrism. More specifically, by focusing on GSP, I respond directly to calls urging us to move critique beyond questioning the more abstract and homogenous manifestations of coloniality towards exposing the more concrete and heterogenous expressions of the colonial/modern and Eurocentric capitalist world order (Gandarilla Salgado, García-Bravo, and Benzi 2021, 212). Scrutinising GSP as a creature of the colonial/modern order matters because it exposes concretely how the global souths are discursively subjected to hierarchical relations of power with the EU through trade.

Last but not least, this work amplifies the democratic stakes of *reimagining* the contemporary commercial relations between the global souths and the EU. By reimagining, I mean shifting the terms of conversation on the GSP not as a generous ‘gift’ for the global souths but rather as a policy deeply implicated in Europe’s colonial past and present. This reimagining comes at a time

of wider and ongoing public attempts in Europe to confront the legacies and continuities of colonial relations in the EU context through citizen participation (Oleart 2023) and the activism of civil society groups, such as the European Network Against Racism⁸ and Decolonial Europe Day.⁹ In addition, the European Parliament has recently passed a resolution on cultivating ‘European historical consciousness’ in a bid to ‘reassess all dark sides of European history, including colonialism, racism, violations of human rights and gender-based historical injustices’ (EP23; EP24). If EU institutions and publics are genuinely committed to taking this consciousness seriously, then, reimagining GSP as entangled in colonial/modern relations further amplifies the urgent need for the EU to ‘ensure that its diplomats and officials have a proper understanding of Europe’s colonial past and how Europe is really viewed around the world’ in tandem with wide-ranging public education campaigns about Europe’s colonial past (Cameron and Islam 2021) and—I would hasten to add—colonial/modern continuities. At the very least, without even invoking the gravity of decolonial theory and praxis, re-imagining GSP is also a democratic invitation for EU policymakers to consider what Rutazibwa refers to as ‘ethical retreat’ in order to create ‘space for the people concerned at the local level, while at the same time, as externals, recommit to the first do no harm principles when devising domestic and international policies’ (Rutazibwa 2014, 300). In policy terms, this ethical retreat does not mean complete disengagement. On the contrary, it demands the (re)making of policies attuned to the expressed demands of their intended beneficiaries without inflicting epistemic injustices and material harms on them. Generally speaking, GSP is officially considered as a policy ‘that works’ from an EU point of view. However, alternative interpretations, including the one I am propelling here, destabilise this image by critiquing how EU trade policies in general tend to paternalise, coerce, or dispossess supposed beneficiaries (e.g., Hurt 2003; Gegout 2016; Cao 2018; Langan 2018; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Confronted with the discomfort that comes with such knowledges, reimagining GSP demands from the EU ‘a deeper politics of postcolonial ethical

⁸ ENAR describes itself as ‘the only pan-European anti-racism network that combines advocacy for racial equality and facilitating cooperation among civil society anti-racism actors in Europe. The organisation was set up in 1998 by grassroots activists on a mission to achieve legal changes at European level and make decisive progress towards racial equality in all EU Member States.’ See: <https://www.enar-eu.org/>

⁹ Decolonial Europe Day sees itself as ‘an initiative that uses the occasion of Europe Day (9 May every year) to bring together existing decolonising initiatives, civil society organisations and other actors around the common project of decolonising Europe, understood as an ongoing process. Our intention is to create a space for exchange on how to decolonise Europe, to amplify decolonial voices in and on Europe, to support the creation of synergies and to make this type of conversation more mainstream in Europe, with the ultimate purpose of dismantling and replacing colonial power structures.’ See: <https://decolonial.eu/>

responsibility regarding global political and economic structures which facilitate dynamics of ongoing dispossession' (Sabaratnam 2017, 144) and reparative actions for colonial/modern injustices through what Bhabra (2022) calls the 'decolonial project for Europe'.

Eurocentrism, hierarchies, and the politics of intervention

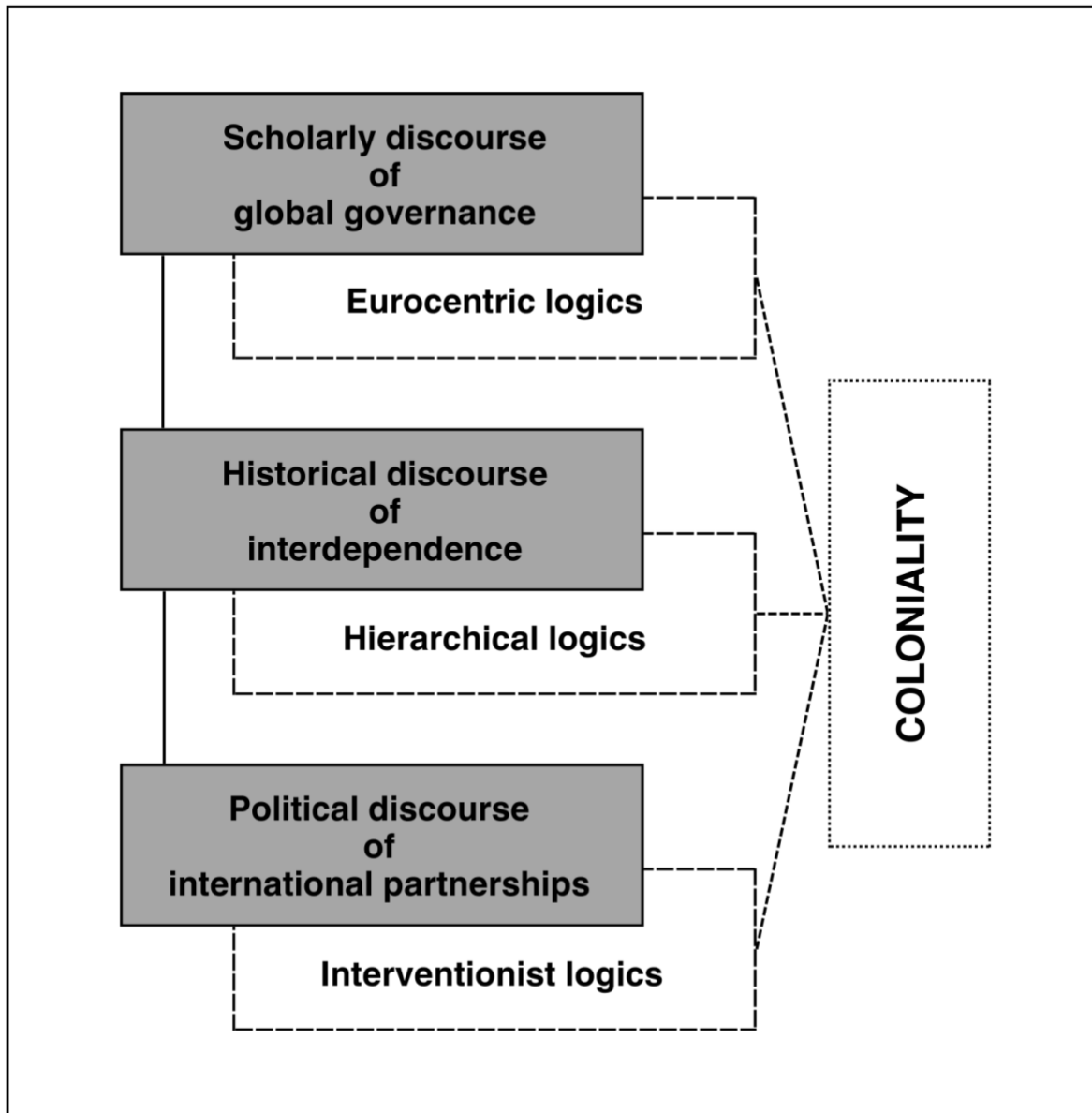
Beyond serving as a unilateral instrument of tariff liberalisation and development, GSP discursively renders the global souths as sites to be ordered, governed, and intervened by the EU. To this end, this dissertation advances three main distinct but intertextually reinforcing interpretive moves to uncover the colonial/modern logics that contradict taken-for-granted historical, scholarly and political discourses about GSP as a policy based on interdependence, global governance, and international partnerships (see Figure 1 for a schematic representation). First: by interrupting Eurocentric forms of reasoning that leverage GSP as a means of global governance in academic research. Second: by historically contextualising GSP within hierarchical relations between the EU's institutional forerunners and the Third World. Third: by unmasking the interventionist logics behind the EU's promotion of international norms in world politics through the workings of GSP.

EU trade policy scholarship rests on Eurocentric assumptions about the EU and its necessary role to inculcate notions and practices of sustainable development in the global souths by means of trade. Eurocentrism is not about scholarly inquiries centred on Europe, including the EU. Properly understood, Eurocentrism as a way of organising the social and political world is 'the sensibility that *Europe is historically, economically, culturally and politically distinctive in ways which significantly determine the overall character of world politics*' (Sabaratnam 2013, 262). Read this way, it enables certain political and epistemic possibilities and precludes others.

One of the possibilities that Eurocentrism has propelled is a global political project in service to imperialism and a global capitalist order where the 'centre' subjugates the 'periphery' (Amin 2009). Such an order hinges on the hierarchical organisation of productive, commercial and financial structures fuelled by the expansion of capitalism in the world economy (Wallerstein 2004). These hierarchical structures reflect the various ways in which countries today are

categorised as ‘developing’ in international relations and how these classifications are used, for example, to formalise eligibility to ‘benefit’ from trade preferences (Farias 2023). Plugged into

Figure 1: Studying the EU GSP policy upwards from a decolonial epistemic location and global souths social location



this global hierarchy, GSP works as a system of differentiation ‘through which actors are organized into vertical relations of super- and subordination’ (Mattern and Zarakol 2016, 624). Thinking about the GSP context in hierarchical terms forces us to foreground systemic power imbalances between the EU and global souths, despite the official image of trade partnerships between them.

As a fixture of the wider development project, GSP authorises the EU to intervene in the ‘developing’ world (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Development is understood here:

as a historically singular experience, the creation of a domain of thought and action, by analyzing the characteristics and interrelations of the three axes that define it: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. (Escobar 1995, 10)

This presumed difference is central to the justification of the development project, which embodies ‘the will to order’ (Macmillan 2013, 1044) economic and political relations between the EU as developed and the global souths as variously ‘underdeveloped’, ‘developing’, or ‘least developed’. In this understanding, my dissertation contends that the EU has more increasingly asserted the language of intervention through the GSP regime. Here, I understand intervention ‘as a shorthand for what are sometimes called “international statebuilding interventions” which incorporate aspects of development, peacebuilding, good governance promotion and general capacity-building in “fragile states” and conflict situations in the global South’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 5). In International Relations, interventions tend to be delimited by a ‘sovereignty frame’ (Reus-Smit 2013). In this frame, sovereign states are largely presumed to be the doers of intervention or the receiving ends of intervention. Interventions are seen as a violation of sovereign power. These analytical givens do not only ignore other ways of intervention in sovereign and non-sovereign global orders, but they also neglect to appreciate the ‘more subtle and intricate ways of attempting to reorder international politics than simply the exercise of coercive power’ (Williams 2013, 1231). For instance, Williams argues that development agencies from the Global North have been increasingly invested in interventionist practices, which are themselves welcomed with open arms by ‘developing’ countries and feed into broader projects of global ordering, global governance, and development promotion.

Stressing the nexus between trade and intervention is nothing new, especially if we consider the peacebuilding literature (e.g., Pugh 2005; Vogel 2022). Taking a conceptual cue from the notions of power *in* trade and power *through* trade (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006; see also Chapter 2 for a discussion), we might distinguish between what I would call intervention *in* trade and intervention *through* trade. On the one hand, intervention *in* trade refers to attempts by the intervener to push for trade-related reforms in the target societies for development, security, or other reasons. Consider, for example, the role of peacebuilding intervention in shaping economic transformations in post-conflict societies:

The hubris of peacebuilders keys the political economy of war-torn societies into a map captioned “the liberal peace project;” that, in its economic dimension, requires convergence towards “market liberalisation.” This became an aggressively promoted orthodoxy, with variations, derived from the late 1990s Washington Consensus on the logically correct path of development for undeveloped states. (Pugh 2005, 23)

More specifically, trade liberalisation has been entrenched as one of the key economic facets of ‘liberal peace’. This underlines the relationship between trade and peacebuilding intervention, especially in so-called least developed countries where ‘trade policies need to be sensitised to the particular conditions of vulnerability and weakness if trade is to enhance, rather than undermine, security for all’ (Willett 2008, 68). More recently, scholarly emphasis has been drawn to the need to investigate how macroeconomic reforms advocated by peacebuilding interventions, including in the area of trade integration, impinge upon post-conflict societies ‘at the level of the everyday’ (Vogel 2022).

On the other hand, intervention *through* trade refers to the ways in which the intervener uses trade policy in pursuit of non-trade objectives, such as humanitarianism, peacebuilding, or sustainable development (cf. Marx et al. 2015). Consider how the World Bank stresses the link between trade and humanitarian intervention in that using trade, especially trade preferences like GSP, may support recovery and reconstruction efforts in countries affected by disasters or humanitarian emergencies (World Bank 2014, 52). For example, the EU offered trade preferences to Pakistan in an attempt to aid its humanitarian needs after experiencing devastating floods in 2010 (Perdikis and Yeung 2012). Another example is how the promotion of peace and stability in conflict-affected

societies might be pursued through the workings of multinational companies, marketplaces, and business networks (Oetzel and Miklian 2017; Miklian and Schouten 2019).

Given this nuanced conceptual difference, it is plausible to interpret GSP as intervention *in* trade in the sense that GSP targets may need to articulate trade liberalisation policy reforms in order to take advantage of EU trade preferences. However, I am less interested in this interpretation than grasping how EU discourses on monitoring missions to, and enhanced engagement with, GSP targets are increasingly hinging on logics that underpin intervention *through* trade. That is, how the EU discursively deploys GSP in the promotion of international conventions on human rights, labour standards, good governance, and environmental protection. In doing so, I heed calls to scrutinise other modes of intervention that tend to be ‘overlooked as a result of limits by posed by disciplinarity and epistemological enclosures’ (Visoka and Lemay-Hébert 2023, 16). Indeed, as these authors observe, the interest of diplomatic studies typically lies in peacemaking interventions; development studies in humanitarian or socio-economic interventions; and peace and conflict studies in military, peacebuilding, or state-building interventions. Here, I suggest that GSP be considered as a policy that cuts across these scholarly ‘enclosures’ since the EU ladens GSP not only with strictly socio-economic meanings (i.e., promotion of exports) but also with humanitarian and state-building meanings (i.e., promotion of international conventions).

In this context, I claim that the idiosyncracies of the EU GSP regime are more and more discursively characterised nowadays by the ‘will to order’ (Reus-Smit 2013) societies in the global souths by the EU-self. This will is alarming, if we consider that, historically speaking, the creation of generalised preferences bled into demands by the Third World in the sixties and seventies to escape imperialism and dependency. What is even more alarming is that the EU-self sweetens GSP as intervention through trade with the language of partnership. This is the interpretive closure facing the targets of GSP:

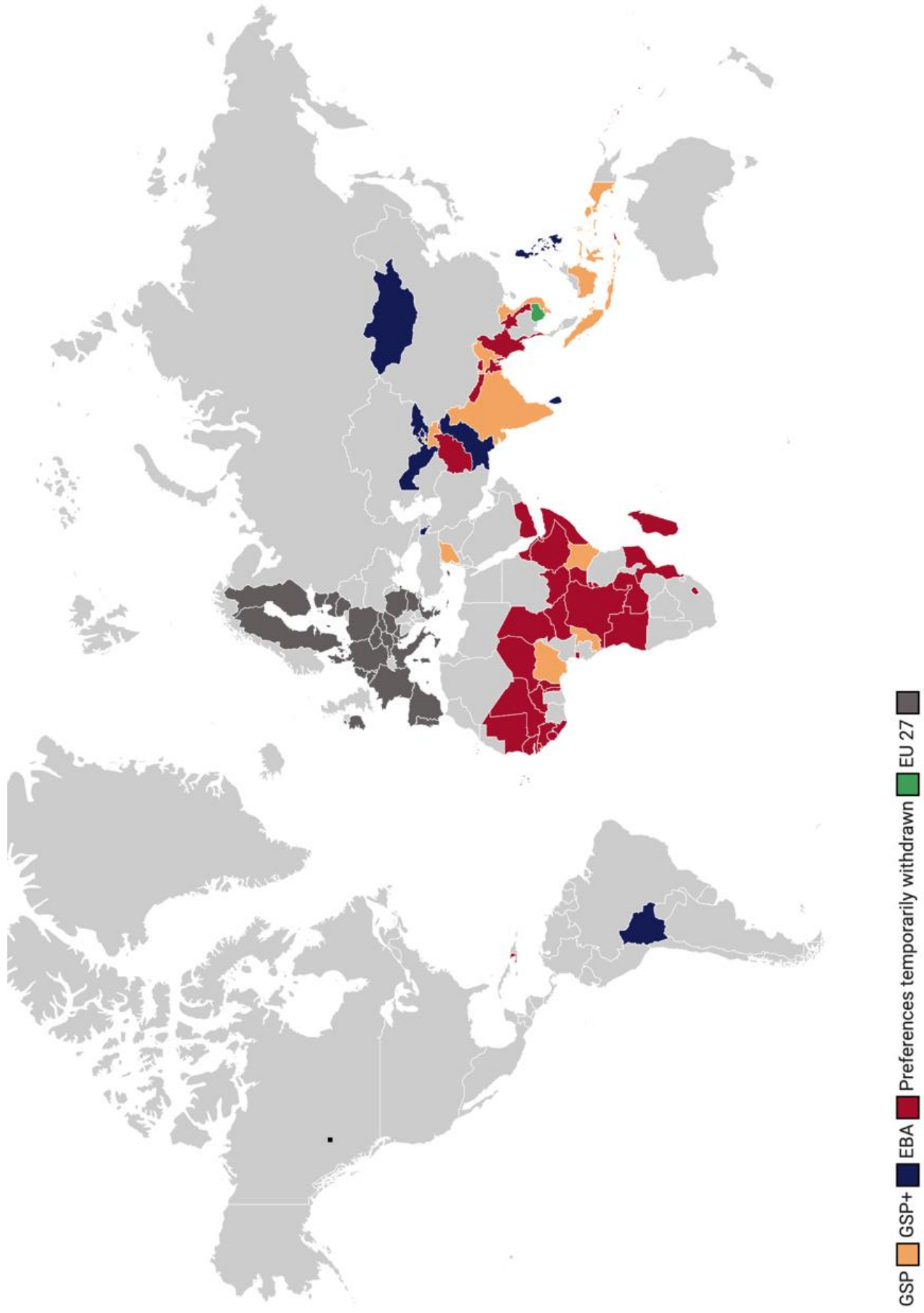
it is relatively easy to identify an adversary who openly represses you, but rather more difficult when he purports to be your ‘liberator’ and greatest friend: when he succeeds in misrepresenting your exploitation as generous ‘aid’ for your ‘development’ and ‘modernization’. (Mészáros 2000, 311)

To problematise this closure, I mobilise the concept of intervention to critically analyse discourses on the EU's trade relations with the global souths from the perspective of the intervener. Exposing the interventionist logics of GSP is heuristically apt because it directs our gaze towards power relations that naturalise 'the contemporary Western-led dominant view on the good life, thus perpetuating the image of the place [*i.e.*, *the global souths*] as needing external presence and interference' (Rutazibwa 2014, 292; emphasis and addition my own).

Interventionist logics are central to the enterprise of development and capacity-building through trade within the GSP regime, which inferiorises the global souths and normalises their being intervened as necessary. By employing intervention to study GSP discourses, I am interested in unmasking 'the imaginaries of interveners [...] and opening up the political logics therein' (Sabaratnam 2017, 6). In this way, I read intervention as 'a colonial-modern technology at its point of departure, specifically, one that erects and polices the difference between sovereign and quasi-sovereign entities via a standard of civilisation' (Shilliam 2013, 1133). This interpretation cannot be emphasised enough because some view the business of interventions as wholly unproblematic and detached from colonial/modern relations. For example, some maintain that interventions 'do not, as empires did, create a blatantly discriminatory caste system based on an ideology of racial superiority' (Ottaway and Lacina 2003, 75). A more realist perspective argues for the necessity of interventions after decolonisation, in a legal sense, since 'in most cases it is not just an advantage which the new nations can afford to take or leave, but a condition for their survival' (Morgenthau 1967, 426–27). However, as I articulate in the following chapters, this is flawed as it ignores the hierarchical relations of power that are entrenched between the EU and its supposed GSP 'beneficiaries'.

It is important to distinguish conceptually between how intervention is programmed and how it unfolds in the field (Jeandesboz 2015, 449). Given my interest in EU discourses in this thesis, I delimit myself to the 'programming' side of intervention through trade. In the context of EU GSP, the 'programming' of intervention is, on the one hand, situated in Brussels within and between different services of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council, and other trade policy actors that engage in shaping trade policy objectives and priorities. On the other hand, the practice of intervention takes place elsewhere geographically and involves a

Figure 2: Map distinguishing GSP targets



Source: GSP Hub (<https://gsphub.eu/country-info>)

completely different constellation of policy actors, e.g., from EU delegations to international monitoring bodies, from government ministries to non-governmental organisations. Intervention is subverted ‘by struggles and contention among its programmers, by the actors in charge of its conduct (the actual interveners) and those targeted by it’ (Jeandesboz 2015, 444). Here, the notion of subversion ‘translates the idea that programmes of intervention are undermined by the system of relations that these programmes contribute to put together’ (ibid., 450). Furthermore, subversion may also mean ‘sub-version’. In this sense, intervention demands alternative interpretations that ‘disentangle the most homogeneous accounts and official narratives and examine the less visible practices that unfold quite literally “below” (“sub-”) the official version of intervention and form the substratum of intervention’ (ibid., 451).

In European Studies, intervention as an interpretive analytical device has been employed to interrogate how the EU’s relations with its presumed others externally are ordered in policy discourse. Arguably, one of the most important writings in this regard is Olivia U. Rutazibwa’s discursive analysis of the EU’s self-understanding as an ‘ethical intervener’ in Africa (Rutazibwa 2010).¹⁰ She contends that the EU’s self-image is problematic due to its historical and contemporary relations with Africa—characterised by colonial, exploitative and paternalistic dynamics. This view casts doubt on the EU’s claim to ethicality and challenges the assumption that the EU commands the moral authority to intervene in African affairs even after colonialism formally ended. The article specifically focuses on the 2007 Joint Africa–EU Strategy, a policy framework meant to deepen partnership between the two continents in various policy areas. Rutazibwa scrutinises the strategy’s underlying logics and argues that it preserves hierarchical power relations between Africa and the EU. For her, the strategy reinforces the EU’s position as a superior benefactor while portraying Africa as a subordinate receiver of aid and development.

Analytically, Rutazibwa differentiates between two distinct but mutually reinforcing ‘mechanisms’ of intervention that provide the discursive basis for the EU’s ‘well-intended actions, as well as enabling them to use invasive or coercive methods in time’ (Rutazibwa 2010, 215). Using the language of ‘mechanisms’ stresses that these technologies are deemed ‘potentially

¹⁰ I am grateful to Rahel Weldeab Sebhatu for leading a reading group session on Africa–EU relations for South/South Movement where I had the chance to re-read and discuss this powerful text with friends and colleagues.

avoidable and thus not a necessary or “natural” feature of international ethical action’ (ibid.). She refers to these technologies as the ‘inequality mechanism’ and the ‘intervener-centric mechanism’.

On the one hand, the inequality mechanism captures the underlying logics of ‘the encounter between the intervening self and the receiving other’ (ibid.). Owing to the material asymmetries between the EU and the global souths, this encounter rests fundamentally on unequal power relations wherein the intervener sees itself as ‘developed’, ‘capable’, and ‘modern’ and at the same time represents the intervened as ‘underdeveloped’, ‘incapable’, and ‘problematic’. This is, of course, not to say that the EU has no problems. The point is that the EU as intervener normalises its problems as technocratic and procedural in nature when it comes to questions of efficiency, effectiveness, or coherence, whereas the EU naturalises the problems that its intervention is supposed to solve as ‘invariably substantive in nature, many and complex’ (ibid., 217). This representation of inequality manifests in the concrete use of political conditionalities and sanctions embedded in interventions in the global souths ‘while at the same time considering them as equal partners and aiming at empowerment and freedom as ultimate policy goals’ (ibid., 216). Intervention, then, is built on a ‘patronising rationale’ where the governments and populations of the global souths are rendered ‘as problematic in various ways and the observance by these governments and populations of EU conditions and priorities is established as the way out of their problematic circumstances’ (Jeandesboz 2015, 443).

On the other hand, the intervener-centric mechanism perpetuates the underlying logics of representational and material inequality within the encounter between the EU and the global souths through discourses and practices of intervention. This mechanism points to the centring of the EU-self and ‘the intervener’s reality and not so much the receivers’ specific needs or situation’ (Rutazibwa 2010, 218). It manifests in a number of ways. First, intervention is itself contingent upon the EU’s own political will, capabilities, and understanding of the socio-political realities of the targets of intervention rather than the latter’s voiced needs or prioritised problems. In this sense, intervention is an arbitrary political act. Second, the EU’s efforts to inculcate change in the targets of intervention aim to transform them into a reflection of the intervener’s ‘own image or an idealised version of this self-image’ (ibid., 219). The intervener pursues these efforts based on a limited set of options, which bear a striking similarity to solutions (or their idealised guises) that

have previously proven successful in similar problems faced by the intervener. Consequently, the targets of intervention are expected to evolve towards the actual or idealised state desired by the intervener. For Rutazibwa, the ultimate ethical objective shifts towards ‘becoming the intervener’ in place of pursuing progress or the ‘good life’ as understood by the intervened societies themselves (ibid., 219). Last but not least, this emphasis on the EU’s efforts pushes the targets of intervention to ‘have an outwardly oriented vision of their reality’ (ibid.). Here, the targets of intervention are expected to accommodate and imbibe the intervener’s realities, rather than seriously prioritising the internal needs, realities, and preferences of the target themselves.

Caveats on the C-word

In this dissertation, I implicate the EU GSP regime in *coloniality* following Latin American and Caribbean decolonial thought, as discussed in the previous section and further in Chapter 1. To be clear, I make no claims of interpreting GSP through the prisms of colonialism, neocolonialism, or postcolonialism. Neither do I claim to introduce any conceptual or theoretical innovations to these interpretive frameworks. These caveats are, of course, not to suggest that these intellectual currents are necessarily mutually exclusive. For instance, some scholars interpret Africa’s relations with the EU and post-Brexit Britain by bringing together decolonial thought with postcolonialism (Sebhatu 2020) and neocolonialism (Langan 2023). I am also not discounting the fact that the EU holds colonial possessions to this day in the form of overseas territories, which further expose the coloniality of the EU project through the political, economic, cultural and discursive articulation of ‘Caribbean Europe’:

as encompassing all Caribbean territories previously colonized by a European power and presently administered as dependencies of a EU member, the formal colonial relation to which still figures in the euphemism of their current official denomination – from ‘territory’ to ‘municipality’, ‘community’, or ‘department’ *of* a European state. (Boatcă 2020, 12)

That said, this thesis demonstrates empirically how coloniality discursively operates in and through the EU GSP policy. That is, how EU discourses inscribe the global souths in colonial/modern relations outside formal colonialism through GSP. As a student of interpretivism, I find it is necessary to distinguish coloniality from other neighbouring concepts to clarify meaning at the

outset. Having clearly spelled out the nuances between colonialism and coloniality in the previous section, let us now turn to the related but distinct concepts of neocolonialism and postcolonialism.

Neocolonialism refers to ‘the continued exercise of political or economic influence over a society in the absence of formal political control’ despite official independence from a foreign colonising power (Go 2016, 1). Kwame Nkrumah articulated the notion of neocolonialism. A renowned African intellectual, he served as the first president of Ghana, which became the first country in Africa to gain independence from Britain’s colonial rule in 1957. In Nkrumah’s words:

The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside. (Nkrumah 1965, ix)

For Nkrumah, Western European powers continued to exert economic and political control over African states even after formally cutting colonial ties with their colonisers. In this sense, neocolonialism assumes a direct continuation from colonialism to the ‘historical and structural condition of dependency’ within relations between formerly colonising states and colonised societies after colonialism (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 73).

In this understanding, it would be a gross simplification to couch GSP in neocolonial terms because the EU as a supranational political creature obviously did not formally colonise its GSP targets. Indeed, unlike the state-centric thesis of neocolonialism, coloniality does not point to ‘economic relations or cultural dynamics in particular territories but to a new matrix of power in the modern world’ (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 76). However, when treated carefully, a neocolonial interpretation of EU GSP is, of course, possible depending on the geopolitical context. For the sake of argument, we can ask, for example, how Spain uses the EU GSP mechanism to exert economic influence over the tuna sector in the Philippines, or how France forces its former colonies in Africa to ‘mirror’ its production practices in agriculture through the EU GSP regime. That said, it is important to point out that neither does this dissertation frame the research in this manner nor engage in critiquing GSP through the lens of neocolonialism (see Langan (2018, ch. 5) for a compelling neocolonial critique of the EU’s Economic Partnership Agreements with African states).

Postcolonialism as a body of thought with a rich global heritage across distinct disciplines and geographies is incredibly difficult to define. Here, I make no attempts at tracing its intellectual genealogy (see Quayson (2000) or Bhabra (2014) for a discussion). To cite a working definition, I understand postcolonialism in this thesis as ‘a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies, as well as at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire’ (Quayson 2000, 93–4). Postcolonialism prioritises a critical inquiry into the conditions under colonialism as much as the conditions arising after the formal end of colonialism. As an intellectual tradition, postcolonialism has been most familiarly associated with the Subaltern Studies Group, a collective of South Asian intellectuals including Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among many others. It is important to emphasise that postcolonial thought has also been articulated from other geopolitical contexts, not least Southeast Asia (Huat 2008), Latin America (Coronil 2004), Eastern Europe (Todorova 1997; Velickovic 2012), and Africa (especially through the writings of Frantz Fanon, often posthumously regarded as a key postcolonial figurehead). Despite their different colonial referents and geographical situatedness, postcolonial thinkers from formerly colonised societies share a central interest in calling attention to the legacies of (typically Western European) colonialisms by scrutinising the cultural, discursive, historical, literary, political or social manifestations of those colonialisms from the perspectives and experiences of the ‘subaltern’ or the ‘other’. Foundational texts in this regard include Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The former unmasked the ways in which Western academic and cultural discourses construct the ‘otherness’ of formerly colonised peoples and places in the so-called ‘East’ and, in so doing, maintain Western superiority. The latter condemned the dehumanising psychological consequences of European colonialism upon African peoples. In the study of EU free trade relations with formerly colonised countries in Southeast Asia, an exemplary analysis from a postcolonial perspective would be to ‘uncloak how latent embedments of the colonial experience in Vietnam’s and Indonesia’s post-colonial national identities influence perceptions of trade agreement negotiations with the EU’ (Nessel 2023, i).

In this sense, this dissertation does not advance a postcolonial critique of GSP by engaging with 'subaltern' experiences and perspectives on the EU trade policy in the formerly colonised contexts of specific GSP target countries. It is important to point out that, elsewhere in the thesis, especially in Part II, I use the hyphenated term post-colonial to describe a temporal context pertaining to the formal end of colonialism, without meaning to invoke the epistemological baggage of postcolonial theory. That said, my thesis mounts a *decolonial critique* of coloniality, i.e., how colonial/modern relations of power persist through EU trade policy discourses about the global souths. It is less interested in making sense of the legacies of colonialism than exposing the continuity of colonial/modern logics in GSP, not as a relic of the past but as something that persists today. Here, I take inspiration from Robbie Shilliam's approach to uncovering the 'colonial logics' that are often hidden, concealed, or submerged in popular and conventional approaches to the study of politics (Shilliam 2021). For instance, in international relations, the colonial logic of civilisational difference between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' peoples rationalised the need for 'good imperial governance' as a solution to the problems of war and violence (ibid., ch. 5).

By analysing colonial/modern logics that undergird EU GSP discourses around interdependence, global governance, and international partnerships, I am interested in making explicit the implicit logics of economic hierarchies, Eurocentrism, and intervention that, through GSP, reproduce coloniality as 'an invisible power matrix that is shaping and sustaining asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the Global South' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012, 181).

Crucially, in critiquing the coloniality of GSP in this thesis, I do not claim that this interpretive manoeuvre is tantamount to 'decolonising' GSP. The critique I offer here is better read as *a necessary but certainly insufficient condition for knowing GSP, otherwise*. I am well aware of the limitation of emphasising discourses in my critique. Yet this creates openings for the more demanding task of generating further knowledges with/in concrete sites of struggles in the global souths to render more legible both the *material* and *symbolic* forms of coloniality through GSP, from the standpoint of entwining critique with emancipatory politics. Following decolonial and interpretive presuppositions, it is not for the researcher to decide what this emancipatory politics might look like. That prerogative lies with the affected communities and supposed beneficiaries of EU trade policy 'from below'. As Colombian anthropologist and pluriversal thinker Arturo

Escobar cautioned us years ago about the search for alternatives: ‘there are no grand alternatives that can be applied to all places or all situations. To think about alternatives in the manner of sustainable development, for instance, is to remain within the same model of thought that produced development and kept it in place’ (Escobar 1995, 222).

In this search for alternatives outside Eurocentrism, it is equally imperative to be critical of state-centric ‘Third World’ or ‘Global South’ essentialisms that frame criticisms of Europe in ‘anti-colonial’ language. And yet sometimes political elites in post-colonial contexts are themselves complicit in the reproduction of coloniality. In Cambodia and the Philippines, the Hun Sen and Duterte governments similarly deployed ‘anti-colonial’ criticisms and refused to bend the knee before a ‘neocolonial’ EU master amidst threats of EU GSP sanctions for violating international conventions on labour rights and human rights. At the same time, their discourses ‘congeal into a global presupposition that there is no alternative to the EU GSP’ in fuelling growth and development in the Cambodian and Philippine contexts (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022, 76). In negating the ‘neocolonial’ projection of EU power, political elites in post-colonial contexts nonetheless enforce internal modes of oppression upon their own peoples. In rejecting the imposition of EU GSP sanctions while succumbing to the colonial/modern logics of GSP, political elites in post-colonial contexts become themselves intimately entangled in the coloniality of GSP. Furthermore, in his neocolonial critique of Europe in Africa, Langan uses the concept of ‘extraversion’ to show that ‘it is possible (and necessary) to acknowledge the agency of African personnel in exacerbating situations of neo-colonialism by inviting foreign elements to further penetrate the African state in question’ (Langan 2018, 21). Aimé Césaire (1972), Frantz Fanon (1961), and Walter Rodney (1972) themselves recognised how African elites may be entangled in sustaining colonial relations. That said, I posit that a decolonial critique of the EU by no means translates to a disavowal of ‘Third World’ or ‘Global South’ complicity in coloniality, or of non-western imperialisms for that matter. Indeed, from a decolonial standpoint, one must be critical of all forms of colonial/modern domination *everywhere*. In this sense, we must not see decolonial critique as a zero-sum game. Instead, to borrow from Tuck and Yang (2012), we must be wary of well-known Eurocentric ‘moves to innocence’ or attempts at equivocation that pull focus away from prosecuting the matter at hand: the imbrication of the EU GSP policy in coloniality.

To think about epistemic and material alternatives to GSP, therefore, is to think with and from context-specific sites of struggles beyond the post-colonial state and through pluriversal ways of being, knowing, and living, in defiance of, if not beyond, colonial/modern global capitalist structures (Kothari et al. 2019). To think about alternatives is not to advocate a return to some idealised pre-colonial past, as critics might be primed to argue against pluriversal discourses and practices – other ways of imagining and inhabiting the social and political world beyond coloniality. As Martinican poet and political leader Aimé Césaire asserted:

No, I repeat. We are not ~~men~~ [peoples] for whom it is a question of “either-or.” For us, the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society we want to revive. (Césaire 1972, 51–2; edits my own)

To think about alternatives is to go beyond. But before going beyond, before thinking about GSP outside coloniality, we must first acknowledge the coloniality of GSP. It is, in future socially engaged inquiries, to think with and from concrete sites of struggle where, for example, garment factory workers in Bangladesh, fishers in Cabo Verde, or palm oil plantation farmers in the Solomon Islands are not only symbolically but also *materially* entangled within the coloniality of the EU GSP regime. It is to reimagine other many possibilities, in the plural, of existing and co-existing in the world beyond the colonial/modern present.

Overview of the dissertation

The rest of the dissertation unfolds in three main parts.

Part I unsettles the scholarly discourse on the EU GSP policy. I claim that the prevailing academic field invested in studying GSP within European Studies is pervaded by Eurocentric positivist logics that constitute the global souths as entities to be governed by the EU through the workings of trade. To this end, Chapter 1 situates the dissertation in interpretive political science, in general, and the critical scholarship on EU trade policy, in particular. From a decolonial epistemic location, it also clarifies the ontological and epistemological presuppositions undergirding the dissertation. It discusses what interpreting policy means. Given the posture that the project assumes in terms of the politics of knowledge generation and the importance of practicing epistemic humility, it also

clarifies that the main interpretive goal of the dissertation is decolonial critique, rather than *Verstehen*, deconstruction, or emancipation. Although EU trade policy may be researched through different interpretive methodologies and methods, I make a case for ‘studying up’ the discourses of differently situated policy elites behind GSP through policy ethnography. In conceptualising Brussels as an ethnographic field, I take seriously the idea of polymorphic engagement by making use of elite interviewing, archival research, and discourse analysis with a focus on uncovering colonial/modern logics as ways to generate and analyse data. In doing so, I challenge the primacy of participant observation in political ethnographies that attempt to research with power holders. Finally, I discuss reflexively my entangled positionalities as an *indio* subject from the global souths in Europe and European Studies and how they have not only shaped but also complicated my methodological choices, including on questions of research ethics, in critical inquiries that study upwards.

In Chapter 2, I review the scholarly literature with a focus on the ways in which the academic discourse of global governance through trade privileges the EU as a trade power that is able and willing to govern globalisation and the global souths. In part due to multilateral inertia and contentious politics against neoliberalism, the EU has charted an external trade agenda that goes beyond tariff liberalisation, regulation, or market access. By virtue of its ‘new generation’ common commercial policy, the EU is today increasingly pursuing norms such as democracy, good governance, human rights, labour standards, and sustainable development, especially in its international relations with ‘problematic’ trade partners from the so-called ‘developing’ world. However, the academy has been largely impervious to alternative ways of knowing that problematise these normative pursuits. In this chapter, I propose a critical reading of the EU’s role in global governance through trade. In particular, I consider four distinct strands of political science writings that investigate how the EU is thought to externalise norms in its preferential trade relations with the global souths: (1) because of the Brussels Effect, (2) as determined by a given constellation of political economy interests, (3) by way of policy export, or (4) through the imposition of sanctions. I contend that such writings not only often sidestep the political agency of people that those norms supposedly claim to transform, but also fail to interrogate the worldviews of, and the unequal power relations (re)produced by, those engaged in articulating a more normative EU trade policy. As such, the chapter is pitched as a ground-clearing exercise for

an interpretive approach to EU trade policy, with an emphasis on the unilateral GSP policy. An interpretive project would puncture mainstream presuppositions about EU trade policy by interrogating how the EU GSP regime is implicated in colonial/modern relations, not as a depoliticised device that benefits the EU's market relations with 'developing' and 'least developed' countries. Therefore, in this light, interpreting GSP coheres with decolonial theory in subverting the Eurocentrism that continues to limit the study of EU trade policy vis-à-vis the global souths.

Part II recasts the historical discourse on the European Economic Community's generalised preferences. In particular, I argue that the inception of the Community's preferential trade policy vis-à-vis the Third World hinged on logics of sustaining global economic hierarchies despite its official discourse of interdependence and South–North cooperation. Chapter 3 contextualises how the Third World prevailed, to an extent, in its struggle to gain preferential market access to the European Economic Community (EEC) without giving market access concessions in return. By legislating a generalised scheme of preferences (GSP) in 1971, the EEC acquiesced to long-standing demands by newly independent ex-colonies and dependent territories on radically reforming the Western-centric global economic order within the framework of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). In this context, I interrogate how the EEC erected a discourse of interdependence through GSP in the sixties and seventies as it derogated from one of the established norms buttressing the liberal world trading order: the most-favoured-nation principle. To this end, I rely mainly on archival research conducted in the Historical Archives of the European Commission in Brussels. I argue that the Community articulated a discourse of interdependence based upon its deep sense of responsibility for being the first major industrialised power to institute a GSP regime as 'an act of faith and solidarity towards disadvantaged countries'. Not only did the Community act responsibly in disproportionately carrying the 'burdens' of offering trade concessions to the rest of the Third World, but it also shielded the interests of its African associates and its own industries at home.

Chapter 4 works through a critical reinterpretation of the interdependence discourse to unmask how the EEC GSP regime reinscribed hierarchical relations of power within a historical milieu supposedly characterised by 'solidaristic ties' and 'economic interdependence' in line with Third

World calls for a New International Economic Order undoing economic imperialism and dependency. First, parochial considerations drove the highly politicised process of defining the ‘developing’ world and, in effect, who could and could not claim preferential access to the Common Market. Second, the Community’s GSP policy fractured the Third World by differentiating between associated African countries and non-associated countries from the rest of the Third World. Last but not least, GSP regurgitated colonial/modern logics as the United Kingdom (UK) defended to preserve its traditional commercial ties with Asian Commonwealth countries and Hong Kong as a dependent territory within an enlarged EEC. Recovering these historiographical erasures—or silences at the very least—renders critical interpretations of the Community’s GSP policy and its contemporary iteration more legible, especially in the context of wider conversations today on overcoming Eurocentrism within EU trade policy scholarship.

Part III interrogates the contemporary political discourse on the EU GSP regime. I contend that, through a discourse of partnerships via GSP, the EU normalises the global souths to be in perpetual need of intervention for them to ‘develop’ not only by trading, but also by ‘striving more’ and ‘behaving better’ to fulfil their obligations to uphold the liberal international order. Drawing on 65 semi-structured interviews with trade policy elites through fieldwork in Brussels, Chapter 5 thickly describes the discursive space entrenching GSP and its political significance, as seen by policy elites speaking for EU institutions, member states, civil society, and business. The EU preferentially opens the single market to exports from the global souths, but targets shall respect and comply with international conventions on human and labour rights as well as principles related to climate, environment, and good governance. First, I spell out the *raison d’être* of GSP and how the EU differentiates between its targets, thereby reifying hierarchies not only between the EU and the global souths, but also between the global souths themselves. Second, I narrate how different EU policy actors exert contesting interpretations of making GSP more normative. Despite these interpretive differences, the need for EU intervention remains unswerving. Third, I zero in on the mechanisms of leverage that the EU employs to propagate international norms by means of preferential market access to the EU. Here, I focus mainly on sustainability and migration as two of the most salient issues emerging from the most recent institutional discussions on renovating the current GSP regulation set to lapse by the end of 2023. Finally, I close by framing and

problematizing the GSP ‘gaze’ within the broader context of the presumed shift from development cooperation to international partnerships in EU external relations.

Chapter 6 challenges the official EU discourse of partnerships by explicating how this discourse occludes increasingly interventionist logics that reproduce colonial difference between the ‘normative’ EU and the ‘unruly’ global souths through EU monitoring missions and GSP withdrawals. By leveraging market access, the EU enters into enhanced engagement and political dialogue with GSP targets through better monitoring to address political shortcomings in GSP targets. Otherwise, the EU might (threaten to) withdraw market access from norm-breakers. I reorient our understanding of GSP by explicating how the EU discursively justifies the imperative of intervention in ‘developing’ countries to help them aspire towards sustainable development through trade. I take issue with the official account of GSP as a policy based on partnership, cooperation, and dialogue by demonstrating how it is undermined by logics of ‘tutelage’ and ‘control’. To this end, I uncover how the language of withdrawing GSP, in case EU efforts to intervene and engage fail, ultimately centres the EU’s (geo)political considerations and orientates the political realities of GSP targets around those of the intervening-self. Last but not least, I end the chapter by pointing to the discursive closure of contemporary GSP relations and the need for an alternative account of EU trade policy by scrutinising how GSP’s interventionist logics work in practice from the perspectives and experiences of peoples in the GSP targets.

In the concluding chapter to this dissertation, I articulate a subjective interpretation of how the global souths are constituted in the EU GSP policy through the intersubjectively shared discourses of global governance through trade, interdependent economic relations, and international partnerships. I claim that, when read intertextually, these scholarly, historical and political discourses on GSP point to global souths–EU relations built on coloniality. I reiterate my contributions to the emerging interpretive and decolonial scholarships on EU trade policy as well as to ongoing scholarly and political discussions on moving away from Eurocentrism in Europe and European Studies. I also entertain alternative accounts of GSP based on standard liberal, realist and political economy interpretations. I argue that they are ill-equipped to interpret GSP *otherwise* given their refusal or inability to grasp GSP within colonial/modern relations. Finally, I point out the limitations of my dissertation and possible research directions to further ‘unlearn’ GSP across

district geopolitical struggles. To propel the critique of policy forward, it is imperative to move beyond the interpretive closure of studying up discourse by *ethically* engaging with emancipatory politics grounded in concrete sites of struggles in GSP-dependent contexts and by taking questions around climate, racism, and gender more seriously in sustaining the critique of GSP.

PART I: UNSETTLING THE SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE ON EU GSP

1. Brussels as a field: Interpreting EU trade policy as an indio

1.1 Introduction

Late in October of 2021, I arrived alone, quarantined and diffident, in a Belgian municipality I intended, as a non-anthropologist, to study up. A small place, and relatively out of reach, it was a world of its own.¹¹ In truth, I didn't mean to do fieldwork in Brussels. Before covid-19 and the coup d'état in Myanmar hit, I had intended to be 'away' and, as ethnographers fondly say, do some 'deep hanging out' in Yangon and Mandalay. There, I had convinced myself to do ethnographic research with workers and policymakers in the context of Myanmar's EU-facing garment economy. Naively, I had wanted to 'decentre' the study of EU trade policy by explaining how and why marketisation so successfully unfolded on the ground and made Myanmar (of all places!) one of the most prolific exporters under the EU's Everything But Arms initiative for 'least developed countries', alongside more established exporters like Bangladesh and Cambodia. Only a few years after its economic rapprochement with the West and the lifting of GSP sanctions in the early 2010s, Myanmar catapulted itself to global value chains in the clothing trade.

I convinced myself that the 'unlikely rise' of the Myanmarese garment economy in global markets was a 'puzzle' worth doing a PhD on, in part because EU trade policy scholarship seems largely unbothered about tilting the methodological focus away from the EU towards GSP targets. At the time, I thought 'decentring' would epitomise what it means to do critical research on EU trade policy. How wrong I was! In EU foreign policy studies, the 'decentring agenda' has emerged as a way to confront Europe as a 'postcolonial' power in world politics by engaging other non-European subjectivities about Europe, without necessarily and fundamentally questioning the power asymmetries between Europe and its others. Decentring is problematic in that it claims to be inspired by decolonial thought and praxis, yet it re-centres the need for European power in external relations (Orbie et al. 2023). It has taken a global pandemic and a political upheaval for me to redirect the ethnographic gaze right towards the (geo)political heartland of EU trade

¹¹ This is a playful—satirical even—reformulation of Clifford Geertz's opening sentences in one of his seminal interpretive writings, *Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight* (Geertz 1973).

policymaking itself: Brussels. Tellingly, committing to this redirection, reluctantly though at first, points to ‘a social science that recognizes its debts to serendipity’ (Pachirat 2018, 35).

Aware of the ‘inability to script the research’ *a priori* in the interpretive tradition (Yanow 2014a, 101), this chapter propels a methodological argument for writing from the ground in Brussels as an outsider interrogating EU trade policy. To this end, I clarify, first, my ontological and epistemological presuppositions drawing on decolonial theory and interpretivism. I also discuss what it means to interpret policy with a focus on policy ethnography and polymorphous engagement. Second, I discuss the belated encounter of, though growing interest in, interpretivism within EU (trade) policy studies. Third, I contend why studying up Brussels as a field is an important contribution to the growing decolonial scholarship on EU trade policy. I discuss the key interpretive research practices that have informed my approaches to elite interviewing, doing archival research, and making sense of discourse. Fourth, I offer a reflexive account of my entangled positionalities as an *indio* subject from the global souths in Europe and European Studies. Fifth, I complicate how we think through research ethics in critical inquiries that study up from a decolonial epistemic location. Last but not least, I close by restating why interpretivism is not impressionism and the promise of policy ethnography in critiquing EU trade policy.

1.2 Knowing policy interpretively

To study policy in the interpretive fashion is to make sense of how differently situated people view a given policy within a specific social and political context. Central to interpretive policy analysis is explicating the meaning(s) embodied in and by public policies (Yanow 2007). It seeks ‘not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning’ (Geertz 1973, 5). In political science, an interpretive approach to policy analysis forms part of wider critical-interpretive methodologies that challenge the dominant positivist paradigm in advancing knowledge claims about the social and political world (Yanow 2000; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Yanow 2007; Pachirat 2013; Lynch 2014; Bevir and Blakely 2018; Pachirat 2018; Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020). While positivism rests on the core assumption that an objective truth about the social and political world exists out there and can be proven or refuted through ‘scientific’ methods of inference, interpretivism challenges this worldview. It insists on explicating

the subjective and intersubjective views of the social and political world—instead of distilling an objective, valid, reliable, generalisable truth. Therefore, an interpretive approach assumes that the ways in which one thinks and knows about social and political realities are fundamentally shaped by one’s own situatedness in the world (Lynch 2014).

Ontologically, this dissertation presupposes an interpretive view of reality or realities in the social and political world. That is to say, no objective truth exists in the study of the social and political world, which is socially constructed and therefore ‘may be apprehended only through interpretation’ (Yanow 2006, 6). Since knowledge is always situated, embodied, and partial, interpretivists reject the possibility of making objective truth claims about social and political phenomena detached from the context under inquiry. It would, therefore, run counter to interpretive ontology to ‘stand outside the subject of study’ (Yanow 2006, 69) or, put differently but with the same effect, to ‘produce knowledge from the Western man “point zero” god-eye view’ (Grosfoguel 2007, 215). For interpretivists, it is not possible to determine that the truth of a knowledge claim corresponds directly with the reality status of social and political conditions:

[Such] an operation is impossible because there is no ‘direct’ access to reality: the ‘view from nowhere’ is an illusion, all the more dangerous as it masquerades as truth. We rather get to ‘know’ reality, or make sense of it, by continuously interpreting it, most pertinently through language as the most common means of representation. (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020, 1222)

In the context of my research, to accept the EU’s official knowledge claims objectively presenting GSP as ‘trade partnerships’ with the global souths is to align with a positivist, not interpretivist, ontology. In this dissertation, I reject and question the reality status of such ‘trade partnerships’ *from somewhere*, i.e., from a particular epistemic location. Indeed, interpretivists would find affinities with decolonial theory’s assertion that ‘we always speak from a particular location in the power structures. Nobody escapes the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’ (Grosfoguel 2007, 213). In turn, this prompts us to turn to questions about the knowability of GSP or the ways in which I claim to generate knowledge about this EU policy interpretively.

Epistemologically, I adhere to ways of knowing with and from the global souths. In particular, my interpretation of GSP is undergirded by what Honduran decolonial scholar Jairo I. Fúñez-Flores

calls ‘transgressive decolonial hermeneutics’ (Fúnez-Flores 2021). This epistemic location strives to ‘unsettle the ontological, epistemological, and methodological limitations imposed by hermeneutics’ Eurocentrism and positivist/empirical textualism, namely as it refuses to engage in *ethico-political* dialogue with others to comprehend and indeed learn from the texts and contexts outside of Europe and its Anglo-American extension’ (ibid., 183). Within this epistemological stance, hermeneutics explicitly engages in a generative dialogue with other ways of interpretation that are geopolitically and epistemically situated in the global souths, which in this case pertains to interrogating colonial/modern modes of organising the world. In line with interpretive ontological presuppositions, this epistemology is transgressive because it refutes the positivist paradigm of doing social and political research ‘from nowhere’. It is also transgressive because it refuses to be confined to the archive of Eurocentric and Anglo-American centric hermeneutic theories and practices, such as Foucauldian theory and critical discourse analysis. It rejects what Māori educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls ‘research through imperial eyes’:

an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. (Smith 1999, 56)

Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics, then, does more than simply deciphering the meaning of texts: it embraces a ‘mode of interpretation entangled with social struggles’ over the politics of knowing, being, and living (Fúnez-Flores 2021, 182). Transgressive decolonial hermeneutics does not prescribe an *a priori* de-contextualised step-by-step neatly defined methodological process. Rather, it is a posture, an orientation, a position. Indeed, decolonial theory prioritises ‘an epistemological position that contributes to a shift in the forms of knowing in which the world is thought from the concrete incarnated experiences of colonial difference and the wounds left’ (Icaza 2017, 29). In other words, to interpret GSP, my dissertation adopts ‘a decolonial epistemology that overtly assumes the decolonial geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge as points of departure to a radical critique’ (Grosfoguel 2007, 215).

In this dissertation, I employ an interpretive research design and analysis that prioritises explicating contexts and meanings over explaining away cause-and-effect variables pointing to some ‘objective truth’ when it comes to studying policy. Although various interpretive

methodological approaches can be used to analyse EU trade policy, this dissertation engages with policy ethnography with a specific focus on ‘studying up’ because of its critical emphasis on interrogating those who are in positions of power and responsible for the (re)production of a given policy—a methodological choice that I justify more fully later in this chapter.

Influenced by ethnographic methods and interpretive approaches to research, policy ethnography traces its intellectual lineage to the critical study of policies within political science, including public policy, public administration, comparative politics, and international relations, but formally outside the disciplinarity of anthropology (Yanow 2011, 300). In today’s globalised world, the imperative of ‘following the policy’ in the field points to looking for diffuse sites of policymaking without being beholden to confine our ethnographic field to a fixed locality as in traditional anthropology. As Dvora Yanow puts it: ‘The policy itself is the site, not some geographically bounded entity’ (Yanow 2011, 305–6). In this sense, it is helpful to think about the notion of ‘policy worlds’ to emphasise that policies are embedded in and through particular socio-political realms:

Policies are not simply external, generalised or constraining forces, nor are they confined to texts. Rather, they are productive, performative and continually contested. A policy finds expression through sequences of events; it creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects, and new webs of meaning. (Shore and Wright 2011, 1)

For ethnographers in political science, fieldwork may not necessarily entail extended immersion as a participant-observer and emplacement to one locale (Schatz 2009a). To be sure, many political ethnographers continue to rely—rightly so—on long-term immersion within a single site of fieldwork (e.g., Pachirat 2013; Simmons 2016). In public policy, for example, Katy Wilkinson makes sense of how policy officials and scientific experts understand and negotiate their positions when it comes to making evidence-based policies through ethnographic immersion at the UK Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Katy Wilkinson 2011). Geddes interprets the web of beliefs surrounding the notion of ‘evidence’ in parliamentary settings by observing and participating in a select committee in the House of Commons (Geddes 2020). Nevertheless, political scientists have also challenged the primacy of extended, mono-sited ethnographies and argue for the methodological necessity to ‘create space for studies of things that move quickly or that present in multiple places, sometimes ephemerally [...] like mushroom spores’ (Pachirat 2018,

28–29). Several ethnographies in political science exemplify this thinking. Following the 2007/08 financial crisis, Ho exposes how Wall Street bankers across different financial institutions understand, justify, and produce a financially hegemonic but tremendously fickle banking and investment system (Ho 2009). Fujii probes why neighbours kill neighbours by interviewing genocide survivors across two *secteurs* in Rwanda (Fujii 2011). Autesserre articulates how the everyday practices and narratives of external peacebuilders in different conflict zones across the world shape the effectiveness of international interventions (Autesserre 2014).

Although doing fieldwork *somewhere* eventually ‘may place us, localize us, this does not mean that the locality is coterminous with the issues that concern us or the people whom we study’ (Norman 2000, 137–38). Instead, policy ethnography works to connect differently situated settings within and across geographical scales into a cohesive ethnographic field. In this sense, when I invoke ‘Brussels’ in this dissertation, I do not simply mean the capital city of Belgium, which also happens to be the heart of EU policymaking. Nor do I mean to flatten the discursive differences within the EU trade policymaking in Brussels. Indeed, some subscribe to a neoliberal reading of GSP; others a normative one. Even ‘progressive’ voices sometimes subvert GSP. They call for reforms on making GSP monitoring more transparent, more enforceable, and with more civil society involvement with a view to making Brussels ‘better’. However, their subversion remains at a procedural level and fails to question substantively the broader power relations that govern GSP. That said, I regard Brussels as an ethnographic field that animates the complex entanglements of, and intersubjective relations between, differently situated EU institutions, organisations, actors, and peoples that have a stake in (re)producing EU trade policy and its imbrication in coloniality across levels of governance (e.g., supranational, national, transnational, international, local) and different sectors (e.g., state, civil society, business, academia). This more expansive conceptualisation points to the necessary task of ‘constructing’ a field in the 21st century:

The notion of immersion implies that the ‘field’ which ethnographers enter exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities which is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered. Yet in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. (Amit 2000, 6)

Within the ‘ethnographic turn’ in political science, the status and use of ethnography are differently understood. Political scientists often misrepresent ethnographic research as, or conflate it with, conducting ‘one-off’ interviews (Yanow 2011, 310). Some ‘mix’ ethnography with regression analysis, rational choice models, or mass surveys (Bevir and Blakely 2018, 89). Positivists in search of law-like causal regularities employ ethnography, from game theory to political economy applications (Kubik 2009, 30–36). Some positivists use ethnographic methods ‘for a context-specific, micro-level search for truth that looks for causality behind performances’ (Schatz 2009a, 13). While ethnographers working interpretively would reject that an objective truth ‘out there’ is retrievable, both positivists and interpretivists regard the role of ethnography in explicating ‘the existence of a social reality that is complex, multivocal, and multi-layered’ (Schatz 2009a, 12).

Studying policy with an ethnographic sensibility would ‘let the people being studied “speak,” an exercise that gives voice to the powerless, the subaltern, and the under-studied; it is therefore an inversion of the usual relationship between researcher and researched’ (Schatz 2009b, 315). Yet this analytical attention to the powerless, the subaltern, and the under-studied—crucial though it may be, if done in ethically responsible and socially engaged ways (Tungohan 2020)—has implications for how we interpret policy in an ethnographic sense: that it fails to ‘study up’ those who produce, mediate, lobby, contest, legislate, regulate, or enact policy. For this reason, policy ethnography has merits since it ‘breaks with the positivistic paradigm of policy as a reified entity and an unanalyzed given’ and explores ‘what policy concretely is, and how it operates, in a way that may challenge the official image policymakers promote of their programs’ (Dubois 2017, 475). It probes how a policy is performed and what it performs ‘to provide a consistent comprehensive view of policy, which invalidates the mainstream notion of a policy as a systematic process or cycle composed of well-organized stages’ (Dubois 2017, 476). Policy ethnography, therefore, entails a critical and immersive interrogation of policy in the field.

1.3 Towards interpretive approaches to EU trade policy studies?

Interpreting EU trade policy is largely absent from the writings of EU trade policy scholars and interpretivists alike. Despite its increasingly normative and geopolitical slants, the world of EU

trade policymaking remains largely opaque to ‘interpretive researchers who have only recently discovered EU trade policy’ (Bollen 2018, 197). Indeed, much of the positivist canon on the EU’s common commercial policy neglects ‘to problematize the neoliberal (dis)course and substantive content of the European Commission’s trade policy, thereby at least implicitly acknowledging that trade openness is [...] the “natural” state of affairs’ (De Ville and Orbie 2014, 153).

By and large, writings on EU trade policy have been impervious to explicitly interpretive approaches. Indeed, the state of the art continues to privilege positivist research strands on explaining the social, political or political economy preferences shaping trade policies bilaterally or multilaterally, strategic calculus of EU institutions over trade policy outcomes, and the drivers of change behind the EU’s trade policy (Dür and Elsig 2011; da Conceição-Heldt 2014; Woolcock 2014; Adriaensen 2016; McKenzie and Meissner 2017; Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018; Meissner and McKenzie 2019; Meunier and Czesana 2019; Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Meissner 2021). That said, the literature has begun gradually tilting the focus away from investigating the institutional determinants of EU trade policies towards examining their external ramifications (García 2018, 72). Emblematic of this shift are research agendas on the EU’s role in global governance, which trace the EU’s external pursuit of ‘non-trade’ policy goals through market mechanisms, including preferential trade policies (Damro 2012; 2015; Marx et al. 2015; Bradford 2020). While this scholarship helps us to appreciate the complexity of EU trade policy today and the political stakes involved, it is fair to say that this body of literature remains couched in a rational, positivist and—dare I say—Eurocentric view of EU trade policy and, thus, fails to fundamentally question its political significance in world politics.

For these reasons, interpreting the production of, and the meaning-making behind, EU preferential trade policy becomes more increasingly difficult to ignore for at least three reasons. First, markets in the global souths are today increasingly exposed to EU markets and ‘chained’ to global production networks due to EU trade preferences (Curran and Nadvi 2015; Pickles et al. 2015; Campling 2016). Second, the EU implicates itself in the governance of these transformations as, some would claim, a ‘market power’ (Damro 2012) or ‘global regulatory hegemon’ (Bradford 2020). Put crudely, these Eurocentric research strands would have us believe that the EU, as a global governor, externalises EU rules and norms outward to ‘unruly’ places through market

mechanisms, including trade preferences. Last but not least, mainstream EU trade policy scholarship is complicit in perpetuating the image of EU market access concessions as necessary and good, ‘trusting that new export opportunities in themselves will foster desired changes in the beneficiaries’ (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006, 921).

Within the belated encounter of EU policy studies with interpretivism (Heinelt and Münch 2018), Bollen contends that ‘the construction of a “thicker” picture of European trade policy will require that we look at the commitments and world views of the people involved in producing it’ (Bollen 2018, 202). It is important to note that there is a strand within EU trade policy studies based upon a ‘constructivist’ international political economy approach that explains the causal role of ideas in shaping EU trade policy (e.g., Siles-Brügge 2013, 2014b; De Ville and Siles-Brügge 2018). Scholars working in this tradition do not necessarily and explicitly write within the interpretive research tradition although they may consider themselves or be considered by others as ‘critical’ (see Bollen (2018) for a discussion). That said, the nascent explicitly interpretive research agenda on EU trade policy, for Bollen (2018), revolves around the European Commission, considering its supranational competence over EU commercial policymaking. Here, the key interest lies in interrogating the interpretations of EU trade commissioners and DG Trade bureaucrats. Doubtless, the time has come to subject the EU’s trade thinking and the policies it (re)produces to interpretive inquiries, given the growing normative bent and (geo)politicisation of EU preferential trade relations with peripheralised economies (Orbie 2008; Faber and Orbie 2009; García and Masselot 2015; Leblond and Viju-Miljusevic 2019; Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Garcia-Duran, Eliasson, and Costa 2020; Poletti and Sicurelli 2022). However, I argue that a credibly ‘thicker’ interpretation of EU trade policy must not only probe the worldviews of those who produce it, but crucially also with whom it is co-produced and those who contest, mediate, and enact it in Brussels. Indeed, within the growing scholarly interest on the global politics of trade preferences, the importance of fieldwork is recognised to shed more light on the ways in which market and social transformations are governed through the globalising pull of EU trade preferences (Curran and Nadvi 2015). To this end, I make a case for interrogating those in positions of power over EU trade policy ethnographically.

1.4 Studying up Brussels

In critically researching the EU trade policy establishment in Brussels, I turn to methodological approaches that take seriously interpretive ways of generating knowledge in social and political studies, such as policy ethnography, elite interviewing, discourse analysis, and archival research (Yanow 2000; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006; Fujii 2011; Lynch 2014; Fujii 2017; Pachirat 2018; Behl 2019). In doing so, this dissertation explicitly mobilises an overarching research strategy of ‘studying up’. Long ago, Laura Nader dared us ‘to study the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty’ (Nader 1974, 5). In shifting the preoccupation from studying ‘down’ in exoticised contexts, scholars from various disciplines have subverted the gold standard of extended immersion in the field in the non-western world by treating the imperial core as the field itself (e.g., Ho 2009; Chambers 2012; Pachirat 2018). Participant observation as a research method may not necessarily ‘travel well up the social structure’ (Gusterson 1997, 115). Indeed, the rosy, quintessential image of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998) may not necessarily always play out when it comes to studying the powers-that-be in metropolitan contexts in the Global North, such as bureaucratic agencies, international organisations, political parties, big transnational corporations, lobby groups, or financial institutions.

Mindful of this, studying up necessitates a methodologically eclectic strategy that creatively relies on other ways of generating ethnographic data beyond participant observation (Nader 1974) or what has been described as ‘polymorphous engagement’ (Gusterson 1997). Polymorphous engagement overcomes the ‘fetishistic obsession with participant observation’ (Gusterson 1997, 116). To be clear, by saying this, I am not denigrating participant observation and its established place in ethnographic practice. Nor am I suggesting that participant observation has no purchase in field research when it comes to researching EU institutions. Indeed, several ethnographic research based on sustained immersion within the European Commission and the European Parliament tell us otherwise (Bellier 2002; Busby 2013; Lewicki 2017). Instead, what I am saying is that it is sometimes necessary to challenge the methodological centrality of participant observation to fieldworking in metropolitan contexts. We need to be sensitive to the social and epistemic location of who is doing fieldwork as well as the idiosyncratic conditions for negotiating

access (some sites may be more open to researchers ‘hanging out’ than others depending on the nature of the policy under question). Instead of being restrictive, the impossibility of mono-sited, extended field immersion accommodates the generation of ethnographic data with different interlocutors and from various sources across multiple sites that together make up a given interpretive community.¹² In other words, polymorphous engagement creates openings for engaging with political and economic elites across dispersed sites in varying levels of access and generating data through different methods and from an eclectic range of sources, including virtual and non-textual ones (Gusterson 1997). In this sense, studying up privileges the research questions we ask about the powerful to ‘lead us to methodology’ instead of methodology dictating what we can claim to know and how (Nader 1974, 24).

In the context of EU trade policy scholarship, studying upwards matters for several reasons. First: studying those in positions of power enacts a politics of refusal within ‘pain-based’ social science research that so often commodifies and perpetuates the othering of historically marginalised societies and communities, especially Indigenous peoples (Tuck and Yang 2014).¹³ By no means does this refusal translate to a wholesale rejection of the presumed ‘other’ within EU trade policy. Nor does this refusal—I hope—reproduce the Eurocentrism I openly seek to challenge. Indeed, I do believe that if we were to genuinely rethink the scholarship on EU trade policy, we would need to take seriously the political interpretations of peoples from/in the global souths whose political interpretations often get submerged or silenced methodologically and politically (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). Rather, doing critical research with the people behind EU trade policy ‘deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny’ (Tuck and Yang 2014, 223). In this sense, I see refusal as a way to militate against the narrative of sometimes even critical social and political science that ‘the objects of research are presumably damaged communities in need of intervention’ (ibid., 243).

Second: denuding Brussels, the geopolitical heart of EU (trade) policymaking, unsettles the traditional imaginary of the field in social and political sciences as a space of backwardness, of powerlessness, of immobility, of lack, of non-thought, of inertia. This compels us to rethink the

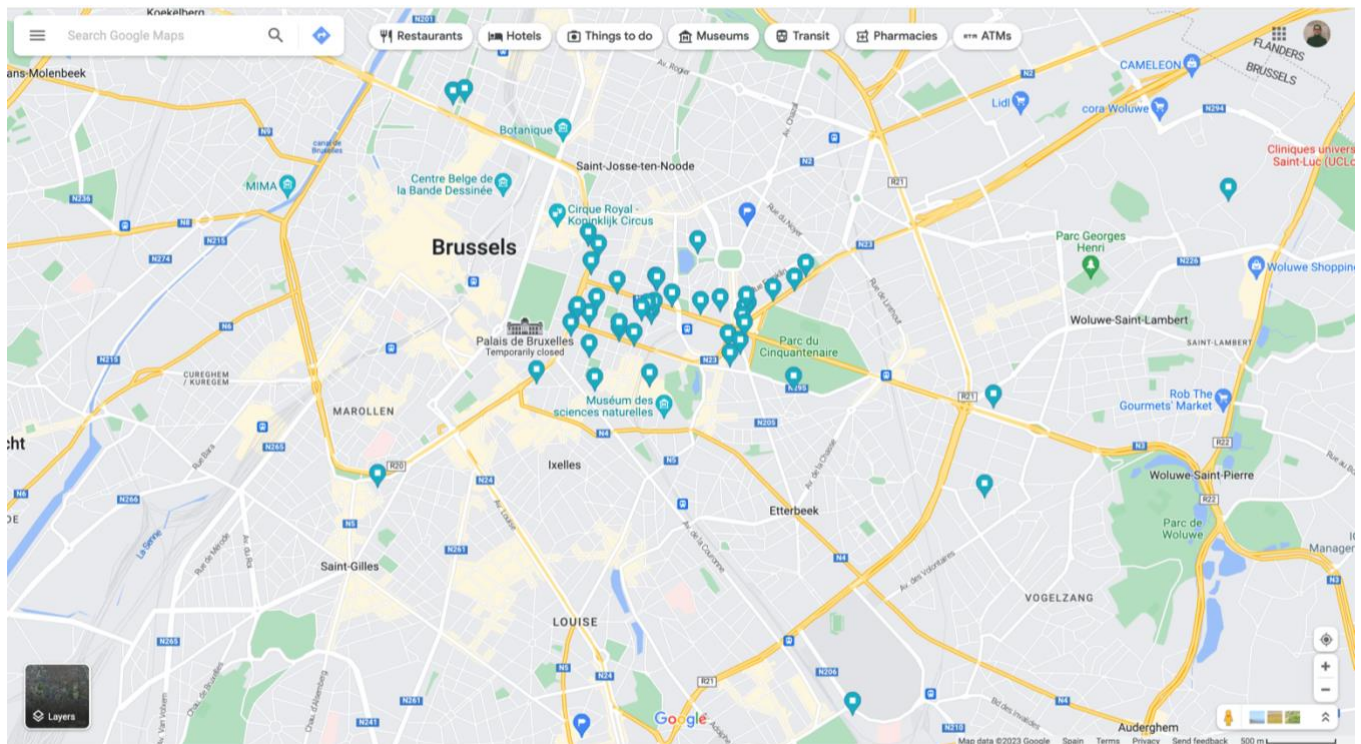
¹² I thank Szilvia Nagy for pushing me to clarify my stance on participant observation.

¹³ I thank Taraf Abu Hamdam and Carolina Bertazolli for introducing me to this powerful text.

ways in which the ‘field’ and the ‘non-field’ have been conventionally conceptualised and practised in many academic disciplines whose ‘resistance to labelling places in the global North as fields is not least due to the perception that they are free of many of problems that can be solved through academic research or policy intervention’ (Richmond, Kappler, and Björkdahl 2015, 41). Here, the need to reconceptualise the field raises the importance of collaborative and emancipatory projects as well as the commitment to researching ‘with’ instead of ‘on’ subjects in the field (ibid., 40). Yet this commitment presupposes a Western-centric positionality and inadvertently forecloses the more fraught imperative of researching ‘as’ the peripheralised, marginalised, colonised subjects themselves. In political and social sciences, the quintessential image of the fieldworker has been and sadly continues to be the Euro-American, intellectually privileged, materially able researcher going ‘away’ to far-flung and exoticised places outside (Western) Europe and North America. How often do we see Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and indigenous peoples doing political fieldwork in, say, Brussels, Geneva, London, New York, Paris, or Vienna? Unsurprisingly, normalising the idea of the racialised researcher in the field in Global North spaces may not only raise eyebrows—as I have often experienced myself during my time in Brussels—among the ‘local’ elites living and working in these places of global power and prestige, but remains also severely gatekept and out of reach for many researchers from the global souths due to material constraints and the violence of visa regimes. In the words of Aimé Césaire: ‘It is the West that studies the ethnography of the others, not the others who study the ethnography of the West’ (Césaire 1972, 54).

Third: doing policy ethnography in Brussels introduces a methodological novelty to the extant critical scholarship on EU trade policy discourse, which tends to analyse already-existing speech acts, texts, or policy documents (e.g., De Ville and Orbie 2014; Jacobs and Orbie 2020; Nessel and Verhaeghe 2022; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Alcazar III 2024). A polymorphous engagement on EU trade policy ‘from below’ helps explicate meaning-making and clarify how (colonial/modern) power operates not only based on documents but a wider array of ethnographic data to make our interpretation thicker and more rigorous. Committing to this kind of research is politically significant, especially if we consider that trade policy scholarship within the Critical European Studies project (Jacobs and Orbie 2020) and a ground-breaking handbook on interpretive

Figure 3: Map of Brussels showing where my interlocutors are situated



Source: My own elaboration on Google Maps

approaches to EU policies (Bollen 2018) is divorced from critiquing the colonial/modern underpinnings of EU trade policy discourses.

In what follows, I discuss the key interpretive research practices I have used in studying up EU trade policy as a researcher with a social and epistemic location from the global souths in Europe and European Studies.

1.4.1 Elite interviewing

This interpretive research project draws on multi-sited fieldwork that I carried out from October 2021 until September 2022. Within this period, I immersed myself in Brussels for a total of ten weeks spread across multiple research visits. I spent most of my time in the field by talking to differently situated EU policy elites having a stake in (re)regulating the GSP policy. In particular, I interviewed with bureaucrats from the central services of the European Commission, officials from different political groups and relevant committees at the European Parliament, trade

diplomats from various EU member states, captains of industry, businesspeople, representatives of nongovernmental organisations, think tankers, policy experts, and other relevant policy actors. In this dissertation, I consider these research participants as policy elites or ‘a group of people who hold or have held a privileged position in society and influenced political processes and outcomes more than the general members of the public’ (Mbohou and Tomkinson 2022, 3).

Out of luck, my fieldwork coincided with the reform cycle over the current GSP regulation legislated in 2012 and set to lapse by the end of 2023. This meant that the GSP ‘file’ was very much on people’s desks and day-to-day agendas. Had I done my fieldwork off GSP ‘season’, I would have had a tougher time negotiating access to possible research participants. The reform cycle served as a good excuse to approach people closely following GSP. I recruited research participants mainly by sending out e-mail invitations. To do this, I kept a contact list of prospective participants that I suspected could be interested in GSP by attending online public events on GSP, by scouring organigrammes published on EU institutions’ websites, and by inspecting open-source GSP-related position papers by various business associations and lobby groups. I had the most difficult time finding relevant people to recruit from the Permanent Representations of EU member states, that is, until one of my first interviews with an EU trade diplomat. Thankfully, this diplomat shared with me, under conditions of anonymity, an internal contact list of the Trade Policy Committee members working on the GSP policy in the European Council. Without having this list at the start of my fieldwork, it would have been quite challenging, if not impossible, to speak with the ‘right’ research participants from EU member states. Curiously, I found the European Parliament quite difficult to access in some respects. Despite sustained attempts to contact the GSP rapporteur at the International Trade Committee and important parliamentary members from certain political groups, I failed to interview these key policymakers. I even managed to approach some of them in person through chance meetings on the hallways inside the European Parliament. Still: these efforts were to no avail. Having said this, many of my leads did turn into actual interview arrangements.

Table 1: Breakdown of interviews by sites

	Brussels	Online	Sub-total
European Commission	10	5	15
European Parliament	8	4	12
EU Member States	8	9	17
Civil society	5	3	8
Business	7	6	13
Total	38	27	65

Across all interviews, I asked my interlocutors to recommend other people I could approach for my research. Thanks to the niche nature of the GSP policy, my interlocutors in the later stages of my fieldwork tended to name the same people and the same organisations. This signalled to me that I have more or less managed to get a sense of ‘who’s who’ when it comes to GSP in Brussels. I relied consistently on this snowballing approach in the field ‘as contingency is not only anticipated but built into the research design’ (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014, 149).

Overall, I managed to generate 65 interviews both *in situ* and online (see Annex A). I employed a series of open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted in a relational manner (see my guide to interviewing in Annex D). In Brussels, I conducted interviews in sterile meeting rooms in heavily secured Commission buildings, well-guarded embassies, buzzing coffee shops in the European Quarter, high-end co-working spaces, office headquarters, swanky hotel lobbies, expensive restaurants, and even public squares. Online, I spoke with people generally from my home office in Barcelona, although I also had some virtual meetings despite being physically present in Brussels, thanks to public transport strikes, teleworking rules, and the occasional European Council meetings in town—events that forced my interlocutors and myself to ‘work from home’.

In general, I endeavoured to conduct as many interviews as possible in person. However, some of them had to take place online because my fieldwork coincided with hybrid modes of working following the relaxation of covid-19 restrictions across the EU. While the standard advice given to students of politics is to retain a methodological emphasis on *in situ* immersion when doing interviews (Mosley 2013), virtual interviewing may not necessarily flatten the ethnographic context within which conversations happen. Nor does it, in my view, contradict the ‘interpretive gestalt’ (Schwartz-Shea 2014) when the researcher is not ‘soaking and poking’ in the field. In my

case, the need for virtual interviewing reflected the contingency of teleworking, which was in part the norm for many of my interlocutors in Brussels at the time of fieldwork. Some conversations simply had to take place remotely out of respect for my interlocutors' preferences or the Belgian government's teleworking mandates. Despite 'being' in the field, some of my conversations were necessarily remote yet by no means less meaningful as I am primarily interested in interpreting my interlocutors' meaning-making or sense-making about GSP.

In my interviews, I asked people about their jobs and how they relate to EU trade policy in general and GSP in particular. I posed simple, sometimes obvious, sometimes naïve questions to uncover how they interpret the significance of GSP: for them, for their organisations, for their member states, for the EU, and for the supposed beneficiaries. Or to expose how they make sense of policy technospeak such as 'enhanced engagement'. Or to reconcile empirical contradictions as to why the EU withdraws preferences from some 'norm-breaking' countries (e.g., Cambodia) and not others (e.g., Myanmar). Or to suggest thinking about GSP withdrawals as sanctions. This strategy helped to foreground the underlying logics behind people's interpretations about the world and the place of the EU and its trade policy in it. I reserved thornier questions around trade sanctions and withdrawals of preferences until the latter part of interviews.

Crucially, I did not raise any questions related to the 'colonial' unless my interlocutors invoked the issue themselves (very rarely did this sort of thing happen) or if I felt I had to probe it given the right context (e.g., when idealising the EU as a 'normative' power in and through GSP). It is important to stress here that I endeavoured to practise the notion of 'temporarily and consciously neglecting theory in favor of "being" in the field' (Kai Wilkinson 2014, 394). The interpretation of GSP via coloniality that I advocate here is something that gradually gelled throughout the research process, in and out of the field, and by moving back and forth between insights learned from 'fieldwork' and 'textwork'.

To be clear, I did not explicitly adopt an approach of 'Let's talk about coloniality!' in my interviews. I doubt I would have made any sense at all to my research participants. I arrived at coloniality *after* fieldwork. During fieldwork and given my prior knowledge of civil society and scholarly discourses about GSP and EU trade policy at the time, I even found myself, in retrospect,

questionably employing the language of ‘neocolonialism’ when speaking about criticisms against GSP with some interlocutors who firmly and even dramatically rejected ‘neocolonial’ criticisms (e.g., Interviews 15, 36; see pp. 151 and 184 for the relevant excerpts). Through recursive and iterative engagement between insights from fieldwork and textwork, I have come to learn that neocolonialism is ill-equipped to make sense of the power relations I seek to critique in the context of this research for reasons I have already stated (see my caveats on the C-word in the Introduction). The point is that this theoretical mistake speaks to the ‘open design’ of interpretive research wherein ‘the researcher learns during encounters with and in the field. Mistakes are gifts in this process, as they reveal flawed assumptions and lead to final conceptualisations over the course of the research process, rather than prior to it’ (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020, 1230).

In this dissertation, I draw on interpretive approaches to interviewing as a way of generating data. Data generation implies that empirical knowledge is neither ‘collected’ nor ‘discovered’, but that it is actively co-produced by the researcher and their interlocutor as ‘meaning-making creatures’ (Yanow 2014b, 9). It is aligned with adopting a research design that is emergent – ‘one which crystallises in the process of research through learning in the field’ (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020, 1224).

In the social sciences, relational interviewing aligns with interpretive approaches to data generation because it places the researcher and the research participant in a mutually generative conversation and recognises their agency to make meaning (Fujii 2017). Deviating from a positivist situation where the interviewer wields more power in ‘collecting’ data from the ‘interviewee’, I think of the encounter between the researcher and the research participant as ‘an inter view, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest’ (Kvale 1996, 14). This dialogic possibility is what lends interviewing its in-depth, open-ended, or ethnographic character, as opposed to the rigid mode of questioning in structured interviews, field surveys, or questionnaires used to, say, (dis)confirm hypotheses in positivist case studies or process-tracing. This non-interpretivist mode of conducting interviews implies a hierarchy that positions the researcher as knower and the researched as merely a site from which data is extracted. For this reason, interpretivists prefer to view the relational nature of interviewing, in its active gerundial

form, as a ‘conversation’ (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014, 149) or as a ‘process’ (Mosley 2013, 10) in making sense of the socio-political world, even with people whose worldviews may not necessarily align with ours, as researchers. It is through communicative exchanges that ethnographic knowledge claims about the world emerges because ‘the use of language is the means by which social life is conducted, the terrain for social [...] negotiation and contestation’ (Gal 2012, 50–51).

Making sense of texts generated through interviewing can be phenomenologically or hermeneutically inflected. On the one hand, phenomenological interviewing can be read as ‘lifeworld interviewing’ which seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and to interpret, or make meaning of, this experience in the social world as mediated by language (Kvale 1996, 5–6; Mosley 2013, 10; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014, 152; Brinkmann 2020). From a phenomenological point of view, interviewing ‘attempts to get beyond immediately experienced meanings in order to articulate the prereflective level of lived meanings, to make the invisible visible’ (Kvale 1996, 53). In the phenomenological tradition, researchers engage in ‘participant conversation’ vis-à-vis the people whose lifeworld we seek to understand by speaking with them (Brinkmann 2020, 8). This emphasis on interpreting lived experiences makes interviewing inflected phenomenologically (Yanow 2014b, 17).

On the other hand, a hermeneutic view of ‘text analogues’ from interviews is primarily concerned with the meanings that people imbue with artefacts (e.g., policy) and what they reveal about people’s thoughts, beliefs, and commitments about the social and political world as expressed through language (Yanow 2007). Interpretation is aimed at situating the research participants’ subjective views in the context of broader cultural, historical, and social phenomena and in juxtaposition with other research participants’ views or, indeed, other views found in already-existing texts. Therefore, in the hermeneutic tradition, interpretivists put emphasis on gaining insights into the underlying meaning of these subjective and intersubjectively shared readings of the social and political world (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006).

Mindful of this philosophical difference, my dissertation aligns more with a hermeneutic perspective on interviewing given my principal interest in critically interrogating discourses about

EU trade policy from the perspective of those involved in (re)producing it. In my reading, a phenomenological view of interviewing in the context of interpreting EU trade policy would be more invested in, for example, understanding how people experience EU trade policy from the perspective of those for whom this policy claims to serve in the global souths. To be clear, my dissertation is not aligned with the latter for reasons I clarify later in this chapter.

In addition, it is important to point out that, for interpretivists, it is not so much about the facticity, reliability or validity of data arising from interviews that is analytically prioritised, but rather in revealing ‘what they convey about the speakers’ worlds and how they experience, navigate, and understand them’ (Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara 2020, 1230). In this sense, one of the methodological strengths of interviewing is the possibility of ‘clarifying, corroborating, and/or refuting the researcher’s meaning making derived from conversation, reading, and/or other conversations, with the same or with other conversants’ (Yanow 2014b, 19). In other words, interpretive researchers are ‘not necessarily beholden to the ideas expressed in a single interview’ (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014, 152), but strive to contextualise what meanings they glean from interview encounters with other interview encounters, ethnographic observations, or texts found in other discursive spaces, such as historical archives.

1.4.2 (En)countering the historical archives

In this project, I also engage in a critical interpretation of the EU’s GSP policy based on research conducted in the Historical Archives of the European Commission in Brussels in the autumn of 2021. The historical documents I have pored over from the archives offer a strikingly rich vista of meaning-making in and through the GSP policy, with countless paper folders and microfiche files dedicated to UNCTAD talks, annual EEC GSP reviews, specific geographies (e.g., Africa, Asia, Latin America), and particular products of concern (e.g., textiles, tobacco). These collections house a wide array of documentary evidence on the GSP, including aide-mémoires, confidential memos, committee reports, communiqués, draft opinions, newspaper clippings, notes verbales, regulatory acts, resolutions, parliamentary questions, public speeches, and working papers, among others. They also include letters and cable correspondences not only between EEC policy actors but also from GSP and third countries intending to make specific (sometimes irate) policy

representations to the EEC. In short, these historical documents articulate different perspectives of different policy actors engaged in (re)ordering the policy world of the GSP. In engaging with what the archives tell us about GSP, I have come to discern official discourses ‘full of contradictions that [...] cried out for examination and critique’ (Lynch 2006, 294).

The Historical Archives of the European Commission represent itself as:

the bridge between the Commission on the one hand and the research community and the public on the other hand. This is shown by the diversity of its users: staff from the Commission and the Institutions, as well as national authorities, academics, journalists, lawyers, etc. The requests made by researchers are varied: some want one specific document, others need numerous files to enable them to carry out extensive research. This service can be considered the guardian of the European Commission’s documentary heritage and therefore makes a vital contribution to building the future of the European Union. (European Commission 2023b)

As the ‘guardian’ of the European Commission’s documentary heritage and institutional memory, the Historical Archives are not merely repositories that house historical evidence waiting to be objectively ‘discovered’ and ‘collected’. In political science and public policy, we stand to gain more awareness about the context within which policies were made in the past by ‘wading through the archival record’ (Frisch et al. 2012, 11). Yet disciplinary anxieties often hold students of politics from taking archival research seriously for fear that available historical documents may be ‘doctored’, deliberately destroyed, incomplete, or manipulated to ‘purposely put documents into the records that portray themselves in the best possible light’ (ibid.). These weaknesses, then, presumably introduce bias into the historical data sources and render them invalid sources of evidence for social and political research.

For interpretivists, these positivist methodological woes are not a cause for alarm since we interpret archives ‘as complex fields of meaning’ (Subotić 2021, 342). As carriers of meaning, archives are necessarily subject to social construction and enmeshed in relations of power. For this reason, data ‘guarded’ in the archives are always partial and fragmentary in nature:

historical sources are always fragmentary because not everything in the past leaves a trace, and not all traces produced are then preserved. It also demonstrates that historical evidence is also always partial: it represents the views, priorities and knowledge of those who produced it. It is also shaped by the subsequent visions and priorities of generations of governments, businesses, archive

professionals, and individuals who have chosen to select, order and preserve certain historical sources (but not others). (Craggs 2016, 111)

In addition, it is not possible for researchers to access everything in the archives. Some collections may be closed off or restricted for consultation since institutions still regard the contemporary or politically sensitive nature of certain documents. These closed archives typically remain classified for a specified duration before being open for consultation to researchers and the wider public (Ogborn 2003, 13). In the case of the Historical Archives of the European Commission, documents are made available for consultation 30 years after they were made. For my dissertation, this 30-year rule did not play against me since I intended to research GSP in the 1960s and 1970s when the policy was being developed for the first time. However, this meant that historical documents surrounding the establishment of the Everything But Arms regime in the early 2000s were not available to me at the time of writing. They would have been welcome intertextual data to further contextualise my interviews.

Given the socially constructed, fragmentary, and partial character of historical archives, we must be attuned to the ethical and reflexive demands when interpreting archived sources ‘because the archival researcher encounters documents and objects that are often completely decontextualized from the social or biographical context in which they were once embedded’ (Subotić 2021, 347). It is therefore imperative for the researcher to situate texts from the archives in their own historical and political context.

Hoping to shed a different light on the Community’s GSP regime, I have analysed historical documents not as a classically trained historian but as an interpretive student interested in examining and challenging the discourses ‘that are constructed and reproduced most frequently by those in power’ (Lynch 2006, 294). In doing so, I consider the archive of historical documents I perused as ‘speech acts’ tethered to sentient ‘agents who generate and deliberate about ideas through discursive interactions that lead to collective action’ (Schmidt 2011, 115). These discursive interactions unfold within a policy–political space symbolised by coordinative policy construction and communicative political legitimation. As I am analytically interested in discourses, I engage with both the coordinative contestations regarding the construction of what EEC GSP policy was and should be as well as the public-facing communicative discourses

articulated by the Community to legitimise its GSP policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Apart from data found in the EU archives, I also turn *intertextually* to historical documents produced by G77, WTO, and UNCTAD to help embed GSP in the wider historical and political context of world politics at the time. Throughout the research process, I also read more historiographical sources on GSP alongside the original sources ‘to keep in mind the wider issues that are being dealt with while also dealing with the detailed nitty-gritty of the sources themselves’ (Ogborn 2003, 19).

The need for reflexivity also amplified the need to be self-aware and transparent about the significance of certain theoretical knowledges given the researcher’s social and epistemic location before, during and after their stay at the archives (Barros et al. 2018, 5). Because of my interest in interpretive and decolonial knowledges, I tended to view the Historical Archives of the European Commission as ‘part of the “worlding” of the Third world, of the process whereby the First world defined the Third or Fourth, whereby colonial and imperial actors from soldiers to statesmen to anthropologists to housewives to archivists constructed a representation of the colony’ (Ghaddar and Caswell 2019, 79).

While the idea of generalised preferences emerged from the anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles of the Third World, the peculiarities of the EU GSP regime have, since its inception, been steeped in colonial relations. The problem is that received scholarly and political discourses often frame Western Europe as the principal subject through whose historical presence the political significance of GSP is normally understood as a way of interdependent development cooperation and partnership in favour of the global souths (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023, 192–93). This historical avatar (cf. Sabaratnam 2013) overlooks or deliberately downplays the temporal context of decolonisation within which newly independent states and dependent territories exerted their political agency in challenging the global economic order, including but not limited to the establishment of a global system of preferences. Therefore, it is incumbent upon a critical account of GSP today to challenge the EU as the protagonist subject of history and to refute historical myths in academic and political discourses about Europe (Sabaratnam 2011, 787). In other words, an interpretive approach to re-historicising GSP considers the ‘historical political processes in ways that illuminate the relationship of these processes to the theoretical discourse of the discipline itself’ (Oren 2006, 218).

Methodologically, a reflexive historically grounded critique of GSP, in my view, would demand two interpretive manoeuvres. The first is to discern how the European Economic Community erected a discourse of interdependence through GSP amidst Third World calls to reform global economic institutions organising South–North relations (see Chapter 3). The second is to contradict the official representation of GSP to uncover the ways in which colonial/modern relations persisted through the translation of GSP as a policy (see Chapter 4). To reorient our interpretation of GSP, it is important to further contextualise and intertextualise these contending interpretations of policy against the background of scholarly discourses happening in the past and today to clarify meaning, which Part II strives to do. In this sense, I gesture towards ‘decolonial archival praxis’ to appreciate how archives and the documents they house are:

embedded within larger discursive formations, in which multiple cultural sites, texts and contexts are active. It pays attention to the multifaceted and complex connections between our archival records, collections, institutions, and traditions, on the one hand, and the histories and contemporary structures of empire and white supremacy, on the other hand. (Ghaddar and Caswell 2019, 78)

Given the social construction of the historical archives and power relations surrounding them, my interpretive account of GSP in Part II should, therefore, be read ‘as a precarious arrangement’ (Barros et al. 2018, 5) and ‘subject to interpretations and further reinterpretations’ (ibid., 11) as more historical knowledges and discourses come to light.

1.4.3 Making sense of discourse, otherwise

Discourses are regimes of meaning people make in relation to the social and political world. Analysing discourses, however, means differently to different discourse analysts who may be orientated around interpretive, narrative, phenomenological, interactional sociolinguistic, psychological, poststructuralist or other analytic traditions (Antaki 2008). Given my research interest in unmasking power relations, the default expectation may be to box my work within the familiar Critical Discourse Analysis or poststructuralist camps. However, as I will argue here and given my social and epistemic location, these established Eurocentric discourse analytic methods are incompatible with the decolonial critique I am articulating in this thesis.

In making sense of the EU's discourses about the global souths and how they sustain unequal relations of power through trade, it is crucial to clarify that this dissertation assumes a particular interpretive posture around knowledge-making: *decolonial critique*. When it comes to interpreting international politics, feminist scholar Cecilia Lynch discusses at least four epistemological orientations of interpretive research (Lynch 2014, 20–21). In general, critique points to 'a research process that not only seeks to make sense of events, but also more specifically to uncover and expose the workings of dominant forms of power in specific contexts' (ibid., 20). Despite having common views about the philosophy of science, critique is distinct to the aims of *Verstehen*, deconstruction, and emancipation. While the sociological notion of *Verstehen* seeks to understand the world without necessarily focusing on relations of power, critique considers the interrogation of hierarchical power relations as central to knowledge-making. So do, indeed, deconstructionist and emancipatory projects in their shared interest in denaturalising and opposing taken-for-granted assumptions, categories, narratives, and relations in the social and political world. Nevertheless, deconstruction, as Lynch notes, traces its intellectual lineage to the work of Jacques Derrida in questioning the linguistic construction of binary logics that justify violent and exploitative politics of difference. For Lynch, Michel Foucault's celebrated genealogical approach coheres with deconstruction in the sense that it traces and exposes how dominant technologies of power come to be. Although deconstructionist scholars may be cautious about 'reconstructing' relations of power, emancipatory research projects, according to Lynch, explicitly challenge hierarchical relations of power with the view to articulating alternative ways of social and political relations *for* the othered, oppressed, marginalised, or powerless.

To be clear, this is not to say that these research goals are mutually exclusive. Indeed, one may well engage critique through deconstruction à la Derrida or à la Foucault, or for emancipation. That said, it is important to stress that, again, given my positionality and the (geo)politics of knowledge my work engages, the critique that enframes my dissertation does not deconstruct EU trade policy discourse in the tradition of Derrida. Nor does it centre Foucault in my analysis of discourse and power. Nor does it claim to be working towards emancipation, given the methodological limits of critiquing coloniality from the hegemonic core and the reflexive need to be epistemically humble about our work, although I intentionally gesture to emancipatory critique by the end of this dissertation.

In line with the epistemology of transgressive decolonial hermeneutics (Fúnez-Flores 2021), my refusal to centre the familiar interpretive frameworks of Eurocentric critical theory approaches in studying discourse in paradigmatically methodological ways is on account of their inability, or refusal, to engage with other knowledges outside the archive of Eurocentric traditions of critique. On the matter of ‘decolonising’ critical theory, Bhambra (2021b) rightly calls out the continued ‘substantive neglect’ of critical theory to come to terms with the colonial/modern, that is, the colonial make-up of modernity. This neglect is not surprising as 30 years ago Edward Said already critiqued critical theory along the same vein:

critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationships between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critique, is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire. (Said 1993, 278)

This is, of course, not to negate the influences of European critical thought on Latin American and Caribbean decolonial thought. Indeed, philosophically, on an ontological level, both intellectual currents:

counter classical positivist approaches to the study of human phenomenon. They point us toward dismantling traditional Western philosophical assumptions and values of empiricism associated with hegemonic forms of knowledge construction. These include research conclusions that privilege reasoning shaped by an underlying belief in the superiority of an either/or, linear, reductionist, hierarchical, concrete, universalist, object/subject or nature/human binary, and neutral, decontextualized, ahistorical, and apolitical methodologies in the construction of claims related to human phenomenon. (Darder 2019, 7–8)

However, despite sharing ontological affinities in rejecting positivist paradigms in the study of the social and political world, critical theory and decolonial theory have fundamental differences on epistemological grounds. To elucidate these differences, it is necessary to revisit the splintering of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group in the late 20th century into two distinct intellectual projects: a project that stayed faithful to postcolonial thought as propelled by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group and another that established the coloniality/modernity school. As Grosfoguel (2007, 211) recounts, the former privileged Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Antonio Gramsci, and Ranajit Guha as the so-called ‘four horses of the apocalypse’. They interpret subalternity from the point of view of postcolonial critique read as a critique of Eurocentrism

through Eurocentric knowledges. The latter became disillusioned with this epistemic privileging of Eurocentric thought. They interpret subalternity as a decolonial critique, as a way of critiquing Eurocentrism from subalternised and silenced knowledges. Grosfoguel, therefore, posits that the postcolonial strand of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group ‘produced studies *about* the subaltern rather than studies *with* and *from* a subaltern perspective’ (ibid).

This splintering also illuminates why the interpretive points of reference of decolonial and postcolonial scholarships differ, even as they similarly problematise questions of colonialism, capitalism, and modernity. Postcolonialism regards the development of global capitalist and modern relations ‘as a European process marked by the Enlightenment, the dawning of industrialization, and the forging of nations in the eighteenth century’ (Coronil 2004, 239). In this sense, postcolonial critique hinges on critical theory’s Eurocentric critique of modernity. In decolonial thought, modernity is understood ‘as a global process involving the expansion of Christendom, the formation of a global market and the creation of transcontinental empires since the sixteenth century’ (ibid.). In this view, the Eurocentric idea of modernity has been intimately co-constituted with coloniality, starting much earlier from the colonial conquests of the Americas and then of Asia and of Africa by European empires. In other words, decolonial critique significantly breaks with postcolonial theory’s Eurocentred critique of modernity.

Given these tensions, my reading of discourse is incommensurable with the familiar and established critical theory variants of doing discourse analysis as my research is grounded in a decolonial, not postcolonial, epistemology, as I have clarified in the caveats section of my introduction. Indeed, I do not claim to be advancing interpretive knowledge claims *about* the EU’s presumed others but rather in conversation *with* and as articulated *from* decolonial knowledges in the global souths.

According to Fúnez-Flores, Diaz, and Jupp (2022), to analyse discourses within decolonial theory and praxis is to make sense of them according to their contextual points of reference. Hermeneutically speaking, discourses feature at least three referential points. The first point of reference is the ‘extralinguistic social reality inscribing meaning (semantics) to concepts always in relation to the lifeworld and its horizon of intelligibility’ (ibid., 596). Here, my point of reference

is the EU's relations with the global souths in the specific historical, scholarly and political context of GSP. The second point of reference is the site of enunciation or epistemic location of the speaker who 'constitutes and is constituted by socio-natural reality' (ibid., 597). Here, my point of reference, as a researcher who recognises they cannot ontologically 'step out' of the inquiry at hand, is speaking explicitly from a decolonial epistemic location. The third point of reference pertains to the interlocutors 'who constitute dialogical, intersubjective relationships' (ibid.). Here, my point of reference is the community of interpreters who are (re)producing GSP as a policy in Brussels. Hermeneutic or textual analysis on its own is insufficient if 'the geopolitical, cultural, and socio-historical contexts are not "referred" to and are hence not understood as conditions of possibility for radical conceptual and intellectual expressions to endure and reemerge' (597). In this sense, we cannot make sense of texts when they are delinked from the contexts within which they are articulated and from the epistemic location of the speaker/self interpreting them.

To be clear, *this dissertation articulates a decolonial critique that interrogates and makes more legible the colonial/modern logics behind EU discourses and how they perpetuate hierarchical relations of power between the EU and the global souths through trade, despite the end of formal colonialism.* In this perspective, critique works specifically to expose the coloniality of GSP and the unequal power relations it sustains. This orientation expands the interpretive horizons of interpretive policy analysis by explicitly analysing how discourse is imbricated in coloniality (Ahmed 2018). Indeed, my reading of 'discourse' and 'power' has been overwhelmingly shaped by decolonial thinking and praxis from the global souths (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023) and post-development politics (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Establishing this epistemological clarity is not only important because it shows that one can study discourse in a different way, but also because my reading of critique has implications on how I come to interpret discourse and make knowledge claims in relation to it.

Methodologically, interpretive policy analysis does not prescribe any canonically accepted form of data generation. However, some analysts often use already-existing data, meaning texts that have not been originally generated in the context of particular research projects (Wodak 2011, 642). However, this emphasis on written and spoken language risks neglecting the significance of other 'discursive spaces' to analysing the meanings embodied in and by policy (Yanow 2011, 306).

This reinforces the importance of polymorphic engagement in policy ethnography. To critique official discourses, it is equally important to work with ethnographic data, such as those generated with interlocutors in the field, in order to explicate policy meanings in addition to and beyond policy documents and speech acts. *Policy ethnography would be even doubly indispensable if critique aimed at exposing the colonial/modern logics behind discourse, as policy documents often do a good job of making these logics invisible or indeterminate, thereby open to re-interpretation.* To further motivate the significance of exposing implicit logics behind discourse to interpret and clarify meaning, let us briefly look at two other research contexts. In the Czech context, Chovanec (2012) interprets the ‘anti-Roma’ logic underlying the electoral discourse of a senatorial candidate whose political campaign, despite staying within the confines of publicly acceptable language, was read to be tinged with racism. Here, the seemingly innocent electoral discourse ‘communicates veiled, ambiguous, indeterminate meanings that are often expressed symbolically and metaphorically, typically drawing on presupposed information that is physically absent from texts’ (ibid., 56). In the EU context, Štěpka (2022) interprets the security logics behind EU policy discourse on migration. Here, the analysis of policy discourse explicates ‘how the idea of risky migrant populations becomes interwoven with the militarisation of EU borders and the notion of protection of vulnerable groups among migrants’ (ibid., 7). Discourse does not necessarily need to overtly articulate a securitisation of migrants. But the implicit logic ‘creates a very specific security framework around them, implicitly placing them within the realm of “exceptionalist” security permeated with urgency, unambiguity, existential threats and an imperative for the application of extraordinary, often militarised, measures’ (ibid., 116–17). In other words, implicit logics or meanings often reside in official discourse. Covert discourse does not need to overtly emphasise tell-tale racist and xenophobic language for it to carry loaded meanings of racism and xenophobia. So, going back to my research context, *official EU trade policy discourse does not necessarily need to frame the global souths explicitly in the language of ‘coloniality’ for us to yield an interpretation of the colonial/modern logics underlying official EU trade policy discourse.*

In other words, ethnographic data would not only further contextualise policy documents, but also aid in arriving at a compelling interpretation—one that makes explicit the implicit meanings behind official discourses. Doing interpretation points to the concept of ‘hermeneutic circle’ as:

both the process of interpreting texts and the communal character of that process: that modes of interpreting (or ‘making’) meaning are developed among a group of people – an epistemic community of interpreters, a circle – acting and interacting together in that process, thereby coming to share, intersubjectively, in the understanding of a problem. (Yanow 2014a, 109)

Understood interpretively, language cannot represent social and political realities in holistic and fixed ways since language is influenced by social factors, as well as temporal and geographical contexts. For this reason, recognising the hermeneutic circle, Lynch reminds us, is central to the interpretive exercise. It refers to the idea that we can better interpret the meaning of a given context or a fragment of it by examining both the individual fragments and how they relate to the entire context. In other words, our interpretation of any fragment of a context is constantly influenced and enriched by our interpretation of the entire context. In this interpretive process, researchers themselves are inherently shaped by the social and political conditions that define the terms of knowledge generation (Lynch 2014, 16–17).

For interpretivists, the key mode of inference is abduction. An abductive mode of inquiry lends itself well to making sense of social and political phenomena that extant knowledge cannot yet explicate by making a ‘lateral move’ to draw on other ways of knowing (Lynch 2014, 20), which in my case is decolonial theory. To clarify and uncover meaning, explication differs from explanation in its goals. While explanation aims to attribute causality in variables-oriented research, explication focuses on elucidating the meaning and significance of phenomena or processes. To explicate is to generate knowledge about their consequences or implications, rather than ascribing causal relationships in positivist research (ibid., 21).

In interpretation, the idea of intertextuality is important owing to the necessity of ‘reading across’ different sources of data, both ‘high’ and ‘low’ (Weldes 2006), as a way to clarify and uncover meaning and expose the relationships between power and knowledge (Lynch 2014, 22). Ethnographic immersion, no matter how immersive it may be rendered through interviewing, is ‘as much characterized by absences as by presences’ (Amit 2000, 12). It is therefore essential for the linguistic evidence to be read alongside other ethnographic data, such as policy documents, archives, images, popular media, and so on.

Taking seriously these intertextual relations aids in investigating and contextualising themes, ideas, processes, and absences not immediately discernible through interviews. For example, I have juxtaposed interview data with interpretations in already-existing texts that some of my research participants shared with me, policy documents I found online, and public statements on the latest GSP policy reform (see Annex C). DG Trade shared with me many of these public statements; they pertain to the submissions of business groups and civil society organisations to the public consultation held by the European Commission on its proposed GSP regulation in 2020.

Beyond texts, I have also paid attention in the field to other discursive spaces, such as the built environment, and how they speak to the broader contextual and political embeddedness of meaning (Yanow 2006). To illustrate this, I often heard and learned in the field that the world of GSP and the broader trade and development policymaking bureaucracy in Brussels have presumably undergone a discursive shift in thinking about the EU's external relations with the global souths not in terms of aid and development, but of partnerships.

Juxtaposing the façades of the old EuropeAid building on Rue Jozef II 54 and the DG International Partnerships building on Rue de la Loi 41 supposedly exemplifies this discursive shift (see Figures 4 and 5). In 2011, the European Commission merged its services responsible for aid (EuropeAid) and development (DEV) as the DG Development and Cooperation — EuropeAid (DEVCO). Then, in 2015, this office rebranded itself as DG International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO). Since 2021, this service has been rechristened as DG International Partnerships (EU Monitor n.d.). Before, orientalist images of farmers, fisherfolks, and schoolchildren decked the EuropeAid headquarters, as if announcing to the outside world they were the 'beneficiaries' needing EU aid. Now, no longer do these images adorn the new DG International Partnerships building. Instead, its exterior announces a more logo-centric representation of the global souths in the form of a text cloud, with prominent words like AFRICA, ASIA, DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABLE GROWTH, and so on. However, when I stepped inside the building for an interview with an EU official there, I was struck by how the interior spaces bear imposing pictorial displays reminiscent of the familiar Eurocentric gaze over the Third World. While this is not the exclusive emphasis of my work, reading across the built space in the field and the interviews informs the overall framing of the research in terms of questioning the EU's discourses about the global souths.

1.5 Writing the indio self in

I am writing as a Buhi'nən.¹⁴ The term Buhi'nən is how the people of Buhi refer to ourselves. The people of Buhi belong to the ethno-linguistic group called Bikolano and are native to the southeastern edge of the province of Camarines Sur in the Bikol region on the northern island of Luzon in the Philippines. I am writing as a racialised, migrant, queer researcher, living and working in Europe, but born and raised in 'post-colonial',¹⁵ christianised, provincial Philippines. While my nuclear family back 'home' is considered low-income by the Philippine state, I have been able to navigate the academy and the field as a relatively privileged person in material terms, owing largely to my Euro-American private education and white-collared professional experiences in the Philippines and Europe. It is through this positionality that I have come to experience and negotiate the *indio*¹⁶ self within the 'field' both in its scholarly and spatio-political connotations, as in European Studies and Brussels respectively. By *indio*, I mean the racialised and civilisational representation of the peoples in what has come to be colonially known as the 'Philippines' under Spanish colonial rule (Salazar 1989). Invoking *indio* here does not only stress the continuing significance of this loaded word today, but also announce the subject-position from which I see myself and how (I think) others see me as an 'other' in the field.

On paper, I have inherited a white man's name. Reading Brussels as a field in political science works against the conventional conception of the 'field' as non-west and those entering it to 'produce' knowledge as western researchers. For me, as a *tercermundista* with a Spanish name, I quickly realised through my initial interactions in the field how my name may have worked in my favour in terms of access. Sometimes I felt I wasn't quite the researcher my interlocutors were

¹⁴ Since the language we use in Buhi is primarily a spoken one, there is no standard way of writing our language phonetically using the standard Latin alphabet. Other variations I have encountered in writing include: Buhinon, Buhi'non, Buhi-non, Boinən, Boīnan, or Buhīnən. I am not a linguist, but I prefer to use Buhi'nən because it accentuates the stress on /hi/ and represents the *schwa* sound in /nən/, which resembles the vowel sound of /pə/ in the French word *petit*. Based on a 2020 census, the town is home to a population of 81,306 people. <https://buhi.gov.ph/profile/>

¹⁵ I am aware of the theoretical implications of this term. I use the term here to emphasise the complex post-colonial condition of the 'Philippines' after having been formally colonised for centuries by Spain, Japan, and the US without foreclosing its continued imbrication in the colonial matrix of power both within the country and in world politics.

¹⁶ 'Derogatory term derived from Spanish for "inhabitants of the Indies." It was also used during the Spanish colonial period in the Americas, though in the Philippines it was considered to be an extremely harsh epithet' (Rizal 1887 [2006], 431).

expecting. Perhaps they had presumed I belonged to the ‘garden’. High up the bunkerised Berlaymont building, this is how my conversation began with a visibly perplexed Spanish official after I set the stage for our interview:

Interlocutor: Before anything else, where are you really from? Your name sounds very Spanish.

Researcher: The Philippines, actually. You know, history?

Interlocutor: Yes, yes, yes. [*blurts out tidbits on the Philippines*]

Power operated over me in the field at the hands of my EU interlocutors often in subtle ways by way of amusement with a slight tinge of othering (*You’re really from the Philippines, right?*), disbelief (*How come you’re into GSP?!*), condescension (*I’m not as smart as you are. Could you speak more plainly?*), and teacher/pupil dynamics (*If you did your homework, you would know that...*). I had a sense that many of my EU interlocutors may have found my presence non-threatening and scholarly interest in GSP curious. How could somebody like *me* be possibly interested in EU trade policy? What is at stake when the othered fieldworker enters Brussels with the distinct disadvantage of not being taken seriously, at least at the outset, as a credible researcher by EU policy elites? How would critical projects that rethink taken-for-granted presuppositions about the EU as a global trade power fare differently, if done by researchers with proximity to whiteness and from the Global North?

No doubt: my presence in the field as someone from the Philippines has intimately shaped my lived experiences in the field and consequently how I have come to interpret the field. By revealing to my interlocutors that I come from a GSP+ country, I have found that this usually prompted research participants to openly speak about issues pointing directly to the data I was there to generate: what GSP means to the people behind it and what this tells us about EU discourses in relation to the global souths. Often, my interlocutors would frame the Philippines as a problem to be solved through the ways of GSP. One ‘accidental’ ethnographic moment that happened outside the interview context (Fujii 2015) stands out for me. Emerging from an hour-long interview at a café near the Arts-Loi metro station, an EU official and I were making small talk about Brussels. At my suggestion, we were walking together towards his office building. It was a sunny, spring afternoon. Silence. *I dread dead air*. Unprompted, he turned to me and said, *You know, Antonio, you in the Philippines have an LGBT rights problem. That’s why I moved to Europe*, I said. *GSP*

could serve as a lever in this regard if only Filipino civil society leaned more on it, he said. Well, it's more complicated than that, I said. Dead air, again.

I wish I could have told him about the *babaylan*—ancient community leaders in many ethnic groups in pre-colonial Philippines whose respected social and cultural roles were typically held by women but also by ‘third gender’ people, similar to the Māhū in Hawai’i. I wish I could have told him that rigid heteronormative conceptions about sexuality and gender had not existed in many pre-colonial societies in the ‘Philippines’, as in others elsewhere. But it was neither the right time nor place to say such things. What matters is that the queer/*indio* self knows. Queerness had been a norm well before we were made *indio* by the coloniser. Reading ‘accidental’ moments like this in the field clues us into the broader social and political world in which the researched and the researcher are positioned (Fujii 2015, 526). When it comes to GSP+ conditionality vis-à-vis the Philippines, the EU presumes a politics of colonial difference and, as such, legitimates the ways in which it claims to exert its norms, its values, its ideas. When LGBT rights in the Philippines are deemed ‘solvable’ through GSP, the EU enacts this politics of difference. Then, the *indio* is judged, once again, as in need of an external force helping to solve their problems—while submerging how such problems came to be in the first place as a result of hundreds of years of colonial erasures.

This ignorance points to wider questions about how Eurocentrism is so entrenched in policy thinking and practice that it disciplines our own subjectivities even as racialised subjects in Europe. I will never forget the one and only conversation I had with a fellow racialised subject in the field. Before meeting in person, I had assumed they would be Irish or Scottish given how their name appeared to me in our e-mail exchanges. When we finally met in person, I felt quite relieved at first—excited even at the prospect of having a conversation (at last!) with someone who could view EU trade policy differently. Never have I ever been so naïve. As our conversation progressed, it became quite clear how they were genuinely defending the usual, unquestioned line about the EU as a ‘good’ trade actor and how ‘developing’ countries need the EU’s generosity through GSP to achieve more progress and develop.

I haven't always been critical of the EU as I am now. I used to be a Europeanist through and through. I studied Europe and the EU half a world away, in Manila, which now seems like a curious place to study Europe and the EU. I had been socialised into thinking and speaking in Eurocentric ways. That we lacked this or that. That the idea of Europe was something to aspire to. That our lives *there* would be better if only our institutions mimicked those *here*. After earning my undergraduate degree in European Studies in 2012, I worked for the European Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines for almost three years, advocating for European business and investment interests in the country. It was here that I first encountered GSP on the job. As part of my job, I supported public-private sector efforts in making the case for why the Philippines' bid to join the GSP+ in 2013/14 would be a good thing for the 'inclusive growth' story that the Aquino Administration was banking on, then. At the time, I thought that trading was a good thing. I was convinced that trading with the EU was a good thing with all the strings attached to it. Full stop. That trade was much more than trade. That trade could serve as a push for reforms that the Philippines so badly needed to realise its growth potential. In retrospect, I thought this way without fully grasping the wider power imbalances surrounding GSP and the EU's role as a global trade power. So much so that, in 2015, I moved from Manila to Europe at the age of 24 to pursue a masters in International Relations and European Studies and research how the EU orchestrates transnational commercial networks to 'diffuse' EU norms in faraway markets, such as the Philippines (Alcazar III 2019). Again, I thought this diffusion and monocausal story was unproblematic. At the same time, my European employer in Manila created a post for me in Budapest during and after my masters there, when Central European University was still based in Hungary. From there, I would go on countless outreach missions and roadshows for almost three years, crisscrossing EU capitals to peddle the Philippines as a viable trade and investment destination for small and medium enterprises from the EU. In short, I was part of the problem. In this industry and policy role, I reproduced Eurocentric discourses about the EU's benevolence as a trading partner for the global souths without realising the colonial/modern constitution of such relations.

But my thinking, I would say, gradually shifted when I started my doctoral studies in 2019 and engaged with interpretivism as a way of looking critically at the social and political world. As I

said in the beginning of this chapter, I had initially wanted to tilt the methodological emphasis away from the EU towards Myanmar to trace how different policy actors in target countries negotiate, contest, translate, and articulate market-making reforms to take advantage of the EU's GSP. Because of world-changing events, I had to redirect the focus towards the centre of meaning-making on EU trade policy: Brussels. *Yet I learned along the way that being analytically invested in meaning-making would be remiss without also interrogating the colonial/modern logics that undergird discourses.* In other words, the critique of EU trade policy that I articulate in this dissertation has been a slow, gradual, ongoing process of unlearning and disrupting the *indio* self. Eventually, I have arrived at this locus of enunciation (Mignolo 2011b) because of the contexts and spaces I have been fortunate enough to engage with at a time when the academy in the Global North is trying (genuinely or otherwise) to learn from other knowledges outside the archive of Eurocentric scholarship. Crucial to this unlearning process has been interrogating the developmentalist scripts sustaining GSP from a pluriversal point of view (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). I have also closely followed ongoing conversations on disrupting European Studies as a member of the University Association for Contemporary European Studies. Here, I have worked on questions around what it might mean to 'decolonise' EU trade relations with the global souths (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). Last but not least, I owe in part my decolonial reading of EU trade policy today to my engagement with university and community initiatives¹⁷ working to question Eurocentric and Western-centric knowledge regimes in the social and political sciences.

As an *indio* researcher living and working in the Global North, I have always considered European Studies to be my 'intellectual home', yet my positionality nonetheless lies outside of Europe, that is, in the very place that EU trade policy seeks to govern, change, transform, regulate. It is through the entanglements of these subject-positions that I have come to generate the methodological framing of this research project and critically write about EU trade policy.

¹⁷ Particularly formative has been my engagement with South/South Movement and the Open Society University Network's 'Decolonising the Curriculum?' project at Central European University.

1.6 Research ethics

Ethical codes and practices on doing research with human subjects in the social and political sciences often prescribe that the researcher should cause no harm to the people with whom we study (Fujii 2012, 101) and that the researched should have some say in how they are ‘faithfully’ represented in research to recognise ‘the potential for a gulf in understanding between the researcher and “others”’ (Schwartz-Shea 2014, 135).¹⁸ These standard prescriptions often apply to contexts where the relations of power are such that the researcher is working with the historically marginalised, the colonised, the subaltern, the indigenous, the vulnerable, the dispossessed, the oppressed, and other ‘othered’ subjects. To be sure, these ethical considerations must be non-negotiable, especially if we accept that the researched have far too often been refused the right to refuse to be researched in the social sciences (Tuck and Yang 2014).

Yet do the same principles travel when the researched possess the power to refuse and are themselves well versed with the enterprise of research? What if we are doing research with people whose policies are themselves causing harm to others, epistemic or otherwise? How ethical is it to let the policy elites we interview to have a say in how we represent their worldviews in critically oriented social inquiries, especially those interrogating the ‘colonial’? What do research ethics look like when studying up?

While I complied with institutional guidelines on obtaining written or oral informed consent in my CEU ethics self-assessment guide (see Annexes E and G), I want to highlight here the ethical issues that go beyond the procedural requirements of securing consent. Indeed, Sultana reminds us that ‘ethical research is produced through negotiated spaces and practices of reflexivity that is critical about issues of positionality and power relations at multiple scales’ (Sultana 2007, 375). Following Fujii (2012), how can we rethink ‘informed consent’ when a procedural ‘yes’ sometimes means

¹⁸ To minimise this ‘gulf in understanding’, the practice of member-checking is often presented as a way of coming back to research participants to ‘triangulate’ our interpretation and see if we ‘got it right’. However, in the interpretive research tradition, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (2020) questions the practice of ‘member-checking’ and its positivist presuppositions. In the context of my research, my interlocutors and I did not negotiate member-checking as a condition to research access. While I did not use member-checking as a general practice, I shared chapters 5 and 6 with one of my interlocutors who had specifically wanted to read my writing. They were the only one who requested this. Considering their feedback, I addressed their minor comments about further anonymising their interview data.

differently to the researcher and their research community? Although a policy official at DG Trade agreed to participate in my research, this consent ‘formally’ kept me at bay from negotiating access to other possible research participants at DG Trade. For my interlocutor, I would apparently not learn anything new by talking with his colleagues given the ‘policy angle’ of my project. Despite this gatekeeping, I still reached out to other officials at DG Trade based on publicly available contact information on the European Commission’s website. All refused me, except the so-called Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade who most likely agreed to speak with me, thanks to a referral from the other Co-Father of GSP at the European External Action Service (EEAS). Tellingly, my DG Trade interlocutors also refused to speak about the ‘colonial’ charge against the EU as a normative power in international trade. They reasoned that harping on about the EU as a colonial power is off-limits, inappropriate, and well beyond the horizons of GSP. Informed consent, then, does not rest solely in a signed sheet of paper or a ticked box on some notepad. Rather, it is something fluid and negotiated continually in the field. In this case, it falls upon the researcher to be vigilant about the substantive aspects of informed consent, how they cordon off certain conversations from happening despite securing procedural consent, and what these tell us about our research community (Fujii 2012, 719).

In the context of social science research involving human subjects, how do we deal with issues around maintaining transparency or being intentionally ambiguous about our positionality to sustain research relationships? In all interviews, I have done best efforts to be transparent about my project, such as by providing detailed descriptions of my project to research participants and respecting the preferences of my interlocutors around anonymity (Fujii 2012). Crucially, this prerogative to be transparent also needs to be reconsidered in situations where framing the research in political terms might get in the way of negotiating access, building trust, or gaining credibility. Especially in critically oriented research projects, framing the research in neutral terms is sometimes necessary to build working relationships with a given research community (Cammett 2006). In this sense, I typically pointed out to my interlocutors that my research would be attempting to view the GSP policy from different perspectives in order to generate a critical reading of it.

The possibility to remain anonymous greatly aided in convincing many of my interlocutors to participate in my study. Without anonymity, I doubt they would have been as unfiltered and as candid in our conversations. On my consent form (see Annex E), I gave all my interlocutors the option to be recorded or not, to speak on the record or anonymously, or whether I could store the interview data generated for the purposes of writing the dissertation or other academic publications. I have kept interview transcripts and interview summaries (for unrecorded conversations) in a secure online drive. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity during and after the course of data generation and analysis, I have anonymised all interview transcripts and summaries by omitting personal identifiers, keeping contact details separate from transcripts, assigning a code to the data generated with each interlocutor, and keeping a physical codebook separate from the data generated. In Chapters 5 and 6 on the contemporary discourses about GSP, I have anonymised the identities of all research participants who preferred to stay anonymous. Without disclosing identities, I have employed the institutional positions or unofficial sobriquets of my interlocutors to contextualise who is speaking and from what political location and to better underline the power relations they represent and that I have experienced in the field (e.g., Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade).¹⁹ In some cases, I have ensured that the descriptors I use are generic enough so that it would be difficult to pinpoint their identities even if I disclose the organisation they belong to (e.g., Policy Official at European Commission, Greens Political Adviser). The premise here is that there are many policy officials working at the European Commission and multiple political advisers working for a political group at the European Parliament.

Considering the need to contextualise my interviews against my ethical obligation to ensure anonymity where needed, I have used different ways of referring to my interlocutors' respective organisations. In the case of the European Parliament, I have made the conscious decision to name the actual political organisations that my interlocutors were speaking for (e.g., Socialists & Democrats, International Trade Committee). In general, I have not specified the DGs at the

¹⁹ My inspiration for this comes from 'The walls spoke when no one else would: Autoethnographic notes on sexual-power gatekeeping within avant-garde academia' by Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro, and Miye Nadya Tom. This chapter appeared in a book entitled 'Sexual Misconduct in Academia: Informing an Ethics of Care in the University' and published by Routledge in 2023. In it, survivors expose the sexual abuse they have experienced under a certain 'star professor' globally renowned for his 'decolonial' scholarship. Shortly after publication, Routledge withdrew the chapter from the edited book, kowtowing to 'a series legal threats from various parties, including from a leading UK law firm acting for one of the accused'. At the time of writing, the rest of the publication stays unavailable. For more context, see: <https://www.routledge.com/search?kw=Sexual+Misconduct+in+Academia>.

European Commission, except for DG Trade and EEAS as the key services responsible for GSP. In the case of civil society and business organisations, I have chosen not to use proper names and instead generalised information (e.g., democracy promotion NGO or sector-specific business group). Naming them outright would run the risk of exposing my interlocutors; normally these organisations employ only one or two people working specifically on trade matters. When referring to trade diplomats from EU member states, I have not specified the countries and instead used the names of relevant formal political groupings in the EU whose membership sometimes overlap (i.e., Baltic Assembly, Benelux, EuroMed 9, New Hanseatic League, Three Seas Initiative, and Visegrád Group).²⁰ This approach promotes a sense of plausible deniability. By adopting these considered measures, I strive to meet institutional expectations about consent while balancing these expectations against the interpretive sensibility of maintaining some level of contextual awareness about the people I have interviewed to the extent that is ethically possible.

Crucially, the methodological anxieties that come with these ethical needs are heightened when the researcher's subjective interpretation goes against the (inter)subjective interpretation of the policy elites about the social and political world. In the interpretive vernacular, this is tantamount to a breakdown in the hermeneutic circle as the researcher refuses to intersubjectively share the ways in which their interpretive community sees, thinks, feels, speaks about, and acts in the world. Their ontologies are at odds with one another. In simple terms, the researcher and the researched view the world in different ways. This interruption emphasises the dilemmas of placing interpretivism in a complicated conversation with other knowledges that are committed to critiquing the continuities of colonial/modern manifestations in political life. Indeed, how can we meet the demands of research ethics when staying faithful to our interlocutors means staying faithful to the policy elites whose discourses are implicated in sustaining hierarchical relations of power?

²⁰ The following political groups include the following members (Cooper 2022):

Baltic Assembly: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania.

Benelux: Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands.

EuroMed9: Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain.

New Hanseatic League: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Sweden.

Three Seas Initiative: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

Visegrád Group: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia.

Ethical dilemmas regarding social inquiries studying the powerful are not at all explicitly considered in ethical research codes with immediate relevance to my work, for instance, by the Central European University (2022), Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (2020), All European Academies (2023), and European Commission (2017). These codes rather emphasise standard guidelines on informed consent, transparency, and confidentiality, which I have followed throughout the research process as discussed previously.

For this reason, to make sense of my ethical dilemmas beyond procedural institutional research ethics, I have turned to indigenous and critical social research traditions that study upwards and emphasise the importance of generating meaningful dialogues across divides and knowledges in the public interest as hallmarks of ethical inquiries.

Consider Natalie A. Chambers' interviews with 'former agents of colonialism' to speak about their memories while working for the Canadian Indian residential school system in the sixties and seventies. She rightly asserts that studying up settler-colonial power holds 'the potential to unearth hidden, subjugated knowledges that speak to the failure of grand narratives and colonial projects' (Chambers 2012, 227). In her study, she considers the dialogic notion of 'ethical space' to make sense of her hierarchical and emotionally charged research relationships with elderly Euro-Canadians. Working across or 'in-between' Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, researchers at the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre in Saskatoon have advocated for the ethical space²¹ as 'a venue within which to articulate the possibilities and challenges of bringing together different ways of coming to knowledge' (Ermine et al. 2004, 16). Applying this notion to my own research context, I consider my fieldwork in Brussels as a space of dialoguing with people across worldviews and perspectives—a relational sensibility that enabled me to build 'working relationships' (Fujii 2017) with people whose discourses about GSP, the global souths, and people *like me* are worlds apart from my own discourses. Therefore, instead of viewing my work as 'unethical' because my interpretation goes against the grain of GSP, I consider my interviews with EU trade policy elites as a difficult but generative process of learning and unlearning in the field.

²¹ Roger Poole coined this term in his 1972 book entitled 'Towards Deep Subjectivity'.

Sociological researchers of powerful corporations make a case for ‘reconstructing’ our notions of research ethics when critiquing the powerful for us to ‘go deeper into critiquing the structure of power relations in a much more social sense, in one that extends beyond the immediate research relationship’ (Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte 2017, 6). They contend that generating knowledges about the social and political world is ‘always in the public interest’ (ibid., 9). This is particularly relevant for GSP given heightened public interest in recent years across the EU in the pursuit of neoliberal trade policies at the expense of ‘preserving European values, norms and standards’ as asserted by civil society organisations (Eliasson and Garcia-Duran 2020, 445). The European Commission itself has put a premium on enhancing transparency and wider societal engagement in order to rehabilitate public trust in EU trade policy [EC29]. Surely, inquiries that critically study how EU trade policy elites speak and think about their supposed beneficiaries in the global souths contribute to this democratic undertaking?

By claiming that colonial/modern logics permeate the intersubjectively shared discourses about the EU GSP regime, I may not make sense to many, if not all, of my research participants. To them, this interpretation may not be a faithful reading of how they make sense of the GSP as policy elites thinking and speaking from a Eurocentric subjectivity and epistemic location. To them, and perhaps also to the academy, this may betray the institutionally accepted codes of what it means to do ‘ethical’ research. Yet, in inquiries that study up and critique policies from a decolonial epistemic location, ‘we need a different understanding of the ethics of representation; we need an ethical position that refuses the refusal’ to be confined to narrow, Eurocentric conceptions of what ethical research may look like (Gaztambide-Fernández 2015, 1141). This compels us to re-envision the procedural demands of ethical research codes and the democratic stakes involved if those codes end up cocooning policy elites and the political institutions they represent from critique.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has made the case for an interpretive approach to GSP. In doing so, it placed interpretive ways of knowing in a generative conversation with knowledges from the global souths as a counter-discourse to question colonial/modern logics about the global souths that run deep in the EU trade policymaking establishment's discourses.

Interpretivism, from a decolonial epistemic location, matters against the backdrop of a political science discipline that is more and more spellbound by scientised ways of researching the 'political' and a European Studies field where the EU's actorness as a global trade power is often seen as an unquestioned given or as a necessary fixture for the EU's presumed others to work towards the 'good life'. For scholars resisting the reigning positivist paradigm in political science and the Eurocentrism—dare I say—of EU trade policy scholarship, it is the criticality of studying up Brussels that compels us to turn to ethnographic ways of knowing—among them, policy ethnography. As I have articulated here, policy ethnography lends itself well to studying EU trade policy upwards and, therefore, contributes towards the growing interpretive scholarship on the EU by making more legible the colonial/modern logics behind elite discourses surrounding GSP—a commitment that even critical and interpretive approaches to EU trade policy often tend to miss (e.g., Bollen 2018; Jacobs and Orbie 2020).

This chapter has demonstrated what makes interpretivism rigorous as a methodology and why interpretivism matters, through policy ethnography, for the critical study of EU preferential trade policy outside Eurocentrism. Policy ethnography of the powerful posits itself as a counter-discourse, as a counter-conduct by interrogating those who produce and reproduce policy (Pachirat 2018, 43; Bevir and Blakely 2018, 94). In doing so, it is important to stress that interpretivism is not impressionism (Yanow 2014a, 100) and, as such, speaks to its own evaluative criteria as a research community (Schwartz-Shea 2014; Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevarra 2020). While I do not have the space to regurgitate these interpretive criteria here, it is the interpretive commitment to reflexivity that makes interpretive knowledge claims rigorous. Reflexivity is never self-indulgent hubris; it clarifies the epistemological stakes of one's work. From the perspectives of decolonial, feminist and indigenous research practices, reflexivity is understood here as an

imperative to be critically, ethically and politically aware of where one's being and knowledge are situated in relation to the colonial/modern structures of power we are studying (Farhana 2007; Chambers 2012; Abdelnour and Moghli 2021; Nadarajah et al. 2022). Reflexivity 'requires far more than a simple cataloguing of identity traits *and* that it must consider alternative sites of knowledge production' (Sweet 2020, 4). In this sense, announcing that I am writing as a Buhi'nən, *indio*, racialised, migrant, queer researcher emplaced in Europe signals that I am interpreting the social and political world from a particular social location. However, saying this is not sufficient without also considering the epistemic location with which, and from where, I claim to know. Reflexivity is the openness, transparency, and critical awareness about how the self shapes the research and how the research, in turn, co-constitutes the self in making sense of the world. From interpretive and decolonial standpoints, research itself is political. So is the self.

2. 'Rule, Europa!': A critique of EU GSP as global governance

2.1 Introduction

As if soothing a spooked European public after widespread backlash against mega trade deals with Canada and the US post-2015, former commissioner for trade Cecilia Malmström had the following to say about trade:

Trade isn't just about protecting our standards at home – but promoting them abroad. By using trade policy as a vehicle for our values, we can shape globalisation, rather than merely submitting to it, or letting others shape it for us. [...] It's about stopping trade that goes against our values. (EC9)

This is central to the story that the EU tells and retells itself and others about the role Brussels plays as a trade power in the world. Indeed, there is nothing new in claiming that the EU exploits its common commercial policy as a normative means to 'harness globalisation' (Orbie 2008) or as a bargaining chip to induce domestic political changes in third countries (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006). Some trade policy scholars, however, have doubted the EU's effectiveness and willingness to 'govern' externally by way of market mechanisms. The EU is sometimes seen as a 'status quo power' rather than a dominant actor that sets trade rules and norms for the rest, given its declining influence to co-orchestrate world trade regimes with the US since the Uruguay Round (De Bièvre and Poletti 2013). What is more, the EU does not endeavour, contrary to mainstream views, to aggressively export its regulatory standards through free trade agreements for fear of torpedoing bilateral negotiations with more advanced economies (Young 2015). Still, others claim that organisational parochialism, not normative romanticism, dictates when and why various EU institutions decide to invest political capital in championing human rights conditionality in free trade deals (McKenzie and Meissner 2017).

Yet this scepticism stresses *reciprocal* trade pacts and circumscribes the ways in which we make sense of the other contours of global governance through trade and their political significance: **unilateral trade preferences**. Taking seriously the production of, and the meaning-making behind, the EU's unilateral, nonreciprocal, preferential trade policies becomes more increasingly difficult to ignore for several reasons. First, the 'conflicted trade power' thesis has long pointed

out a fundamental contradiction between the EU's supposed promotion of 'shared norms' through consensus and cooperation with trade partners, on the one hand, and leveraging such norms as economic coercion against 'problematic' third countries, on the other (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006, 920). Second, we have witnessed in the past two decades an ever-expanding scope of 'new generation' trade agreements and institutional innovations in EU trade policymaking. These developments have attracted greater scrutiny from governments, parliaments, civil society, businesses, and citizens within and outside Europe. EU trade policy has moved beyond economic liberalisation and now constitutionally covers the external advancement of norms, such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights, as mandated by the Treaty of Lisbon (Leblond and Viju-Miljusevic 2019). More and more, as the Trade Policy Review of 2021 unveils, the European Commission prefers a more overtly muscular approach to trade policy by assertively defending EU interests and values in external relations (EC30; EC31). President Ursula von der Leyen's discourse around a 'geopolitical Commission' (EC40) and the recent establishment of the Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (EC41) both mirror this growing assertiveness. Last but not least, recent writings have been preoccupied with questioning the EU's pursuit of a normative trade agenda in international relations. Hierarchical power relations continue to organise the EU's preferential trade relations despite its sunny language of dialoguing and partnerships with countries from the 'developing' world (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Some point to the colonial/modern logics of Eurocentrism in how we study EU external trade relations and take seriously alternative 'subject-positions' from which to speak about the EU as a global trade power by turning to decolonial thought and praxis (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023).

In this chapter, I advance a critical reading of the EU as a trade power in world politics. In what follows, I revisit, first, the literature on the EU's pursuit of norms in global governance by means of trade. Second, I review four strands of political science writings that investigate how the EU is presumed to externalise norms in its trade relations with the global souths, with an emphasis on the unilateral GSP policy: (1) thanks to the Brussels Effect; (2) by way of norm export; (3) as determined by a given constellation of contending political economy interests, and (4) through the imposition of sanctions. *I contend that such writings not only often sidestep the political subjecthood of people that those norms supposedly claim to transform, but also fail to interrogate the worldviews of, and the unequal power relations (re)produced by, those engaged in articulating*

a more normative EU trade policy. In other words, Eurocentric colonial/modern logics permeate the scholarly discourse of global governance through trade. As such, the chapter is pitched as a ground-clearing exercise for a decolonial critique of GSP. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on why a decolonial critique matters to the critical scholarship on the ways in which power operates through EU trade policy, which is ‘now a concern in a much wider political world than the traditional, obscure, technocratic policy world where it used to live’ (Young and Peterson 2006, 810).

2.2 Welcome to the age of geopolitics: Global governance through trade?

Global governance is ‘fundamentally concerned with the ordering and preservation of power and with answers to the question of who exercises power’ in the world order beyond the narrow positivist and functionalist conception of delivering global public goods and resolving collective action problems (Hurrell 2017, 26). Since the start of the 21st century, the EU has been conventionally conceptualised as ‘a power through trade, using access to its huge market as a bargaining chip to obtain changes in the domestic policies of its trading partners, from labour standards to human rights, and more generally to shape new patterns of global governance’ (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006, 907). Interpreting the nature of those desired ‘changes’ and the meaning of ‘global governance’ remains, however, notoriously fuzzy in the context of contemporary EU trade policy. For some, global governance speaks to the EU’s pursuit of deep trade and regulatory agendas in bilateral, plurilateral, and multilateral settings (Young and Peterson 2006; Conconi 2009). This coheres more with the notion of the EU as a power *in* trade (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006). The principal–agent literature is emblematic of this approach. For example, Meunier analyses whether the European Commission has exercised relative autonomy from the preferences of EU member states in pushing for the EU’s negotiating positions in multilateral trade talks, particularly in the Doha Round (Meunier 2007). Determining the sufficient conditions under which the EU becomes effective or not in global trade governance has been of particular interest to some. Both internal cohesiveness and bargaining power asymmetry affect the extent to which the EU achieves its preferences externally, such as in the case of EU–Mexico trade negotiations. In contrast, the effectiveness of the EU, despite being internally cohesive on its

preferences, has been restricted in the Doha Round, characterised by bargaining power symmetry (da Conceição-Heldt 2014).

In political science, a widely accepted reading of global governance through trade relates to the use of market access to pursue political ends ‘in a world that has witnessed a tremendous growth in international commerce and an increasing dependency of countries on exports’ (Marx et al. 2015). In the face of inertia plaguing multilateral initiatives, international actors enact foreign policy by other means. For the EU, this means leveraging its power through trade. To shape ‘behind-the-border’ transformations in other jurisdictions on matters like labour rights or climate protection, the EU relies on its sheer economic mass and regulatory edge as disproportionate political clout (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006; Marx et al. 2015). On paper, the EU’s common commercial policy and its so-called contribution to ‘good global governance’ in external relations are wedded under the Treaty on the European Union (Larik 2015).

Norms remain central to the study of the EU in the world, not least when it comes to the politics of external trade. The much cited notion of ‘Normative Power Europe’ pertains to the EU’s ‘ability to define what passes for “normal” in world politics’ (Manners 2002, 253). However, scholarly interpretations of what specific norms the EU pursues externally tend to oscillate widely. In an early contribution, those are understood to be the ‘core norms’ promulgated as the four principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and rule of law within the EU’s foundational treaties (Manners 2002, 242). A similar reading can be discerned in the *Global Governance through Trade* compendium (Marx et al. 2015, 3–4). Here, norms either retain their level of generality or further collapse into more fine-grained ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ norms as variegated as human rights, democracy, sustainable development, climate change provisions, labour rights, EU Timber Regulations, EU Renewable Energy Directive, and EU Seals Regulations. Elsewhere, norms explicitly pertain to rules concocted in the EU, such as competition law, data protection regulation, consumer health and safety measures, and environmental protection standards (Bradford 2020). Bilaterally, the EU has tried to champion norms like labour standards in its free trade pact with South Korea (García 2022) or the respect of internationally agreed conventions in its conditional preferential trade relations with the Philippines (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Inter-regionally, the EU endeavours to promote neoliberal

governance in Latin America and the Caribbean (Icaza 2010), regional integration in Southeast Asia (Jetschke and Murray 2012), regulatory governance regimes in the Mercado Común del Sur (Bianculli 2016), and good governance in sub-Saharan Africa (Bodenstein 2021). In a special issue on the trade–development nexus within EU external relations, norms are cautiously read as ‘lofty objectives in EU discourse’ that often fail to translate into praxis: pro-development, pro-poor agenda in untied aid, regional integration, human rights promotion, and decent work agenda (Carbone and Orbie 2014, 5). Last but not least, norms favoured by the EU may also be found discriminatory and illegal under WTO law, such as when the EU tried (mis)using its trade preferences as an incentive for countries that combat drug trafficking during the 1990s and early 2000s (Conconi 2009) or as humanitarian aid for a calamity-stricken Pakistan in 2010 (Bossuyt, Orbie, and Drieghe 2020).

Unsurprisingly, there is also no generally accepted view of what constitutes norms. For Damro, the EU as a market power externalises both ‘trade’ and ‘non-trade’ objectives in global governance, as if wanting to escape the ‘woolly’ language of norms (Damro 2015). This dichotomous framing, however, suggests that ‘objectives’ that are couched as ‘non-trade’ (e.g., human rights and democracy) are tacitly normative in nature. Young observes that different scholars studying the trade–development nexus in EU policy understand norms differently. Some use norms interchangeably with ‘rules’ or ‘laws’ (as in the case of WTO norms) or as ‘common understandings’ of how best to achieve a given end (as in the dominant preference in the EU for a neoliberal approach to international development). As such, the use of ‘norms’ implies ‘beliefs’ or ‘ideas’ in a broader sense in contradistinction to ‘values’ as formulated by the Normative Power Europe thesis (Young 2015).

The EU’s normative agenda in global governance seems more tenuous in the face of a so-called emerging ‘gloeconomic pivot’ wherein EU institutions ‘directly or indirectly instrumentalise global trade, finance, or value chains for purposes both of and beyond direct economic objectives’ (Olsen 2022, 6). To be sure, EU trade policy ‘erupted into public discourse’ as a result of the widespread public opposition to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the US and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada in the mid-2010s (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019, 103). In this context, comparative accounts seek to explain why some EU

trade pacts incite public salience in the EU, whereas others do not (Meunier and Czesana 2019). Still, others argue that, more importantly than internal or external politicisation, the EU has found itself in the crossfires of a growing ‘geopoliticisation’ of trade and investment policies:

For the EU, the external politicization of trade is no longer about trying to change countries from within through trade power, as it tried to do in the previous two decades. Instead, it has become able to change the global balance of power through trade and to use economic statecraft to compete on a level playing field when the breakdown of multilateralism has fragmented the world into regions and rival powers. (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019, 103)

In the context of GSP, the claim that the EU no longer tries to ‘change countries from within through trade power’ (ibid.) seems questionable, since the EU continues to inculcate change in ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries through trade, as I show in Part III. Although the EU may have been inadvertently dragged into the tit-for-tat trade imbroglios with other ‘great’ powers, the EU’s self-styled normative external trade project remains in part the status quo undergirding the EU’s nonreciprocal trade relations with the global souths (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023).

2.3 State of the art: Norms and the EU GSP regime

Not to be confused with mutual free trade agreements, the EU GSP regime is a nonreciprocal, unilateral trade arrangement organised under the GATT/WTO Enabling Clause or the principle of special and differential treatment. This principle departs from the most-favoured-nation clause and allows willing WTO members to grant unilateral trade concessions to countries from the global souths without extracting any reciprocal treatment.²² Since its inception in 1971, the EU GSP has undergone regular reforms, thereby enlarging and shrinking the scope of eligible products and countries, heightening the level of differentiation among ‘beneficiaries’, and tweaking the intensity of political conditionality (Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018). As such, scholars often see GSP as, rather crudely, both a carrot and a stick, or ‘as a lever for encouraging desirable or punishing undesirable behaviour through preferences or sanctions, respectively’ (Young and Peterson 2006, 801).

²² A list of existing preferential trade arrangements can be found here: <http://ptadb.wto.org/ptaList.aspx>

In political science, several strands stand out when it comes to studying how the EU subjects the global souths to global governance discourse by exploiting its GSP regime to enforce norms in world politics through Eurocentric logics. I argue that the ‘state of the art’ continues to privilege positivist approaches preoccupied with studying GSP in terms of ‘depoliticised’ regulatory change, political economy determinants, policy transfer, and its effectiveness or conditions as a coercive instrument. This is in line with the observation that rational choice approaches cast a large shadow on the mainstream EU trade policy literature (De Ville and Orbie 2014). Yet it is crucial to point out a growing number of critical writings that shed a different light on the EU’s supposed normative trade agenda by fundamentally questioning and subverting the positivist assumptions and continuing coloniality of GSP and EU external trade policy more broadly (Bollen 2018; Langan and Price 2020; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023).

2.3.1 The Brussels Effect

Unsettling sceptical views about the EU’s rule-setting clout in today’s global economy, Bradford theorises the EU as a ‘global regulatory hegemon’ that is able and willing to unilaterally uphold a globe-spanning rules-based trading order (Bradford 2020, 5). The author coins the concept ‘Brussels Effect’ to capture the ways in which market mechanisms diffuse EU regulations to market actors and regulators beyond the EU. For her, the Brussels Effect assumes *de facto* and *de jure* forms. The former captures the phenomenon where non-EU firms voluntarily respect EU regulatory standards and orient their global corporate activities to the European single market. These firms elect to do so, even though no regulatory obligation is required by their host countries overseas. The latter pertains to ‘the diffusion of EU norms through international treaties and institutions’ (Bradford 2020, 3). Here, non-EU states presumably ‘emulate’ and implement EU regulations, because firms, which follow more stringent EU rules and want to operate on a level playing field domestically, lobby their home governments to formally adopt rules à la EU. In other words:

Lacking traditional means of power, the EU’s greatest global influence is accomplished through the norms that it has the competence to promulgate. In the absence of military power or unconstrained economic power, the EU can exercise genuine unilateral power most effectively by fixing the standards of behavior for the rest of the world. (Bradford 2020, 23)

The Brussels Effect effectively depoliticises the EU's hegemonic regulatory power in that countries from the global souths, by exposing themselves to EU rules, 'can more effectively point to deficiencies [...] in their own legal systems' and 'outsource their regulatory pursuits to a more resourceful and experienced agency' (Bradford 2020, 251, 253). Crucially, such power-blind arguments overlook the contested notion of 'development' as regulatory change, which is sometimes 'defined locally not as broad societal growth but the unjustified picking of "winner" and "loser" communities by foreign entities' (Miklian 2019, 57). More specifically, Bradford bulldozes over possible arguments against the EU's long regulatory arm being anti-innovation, protectionist, and a new form of regulatory imperialism. The author dismisses the EU's regulatory reign as a *fait accompli*, since we apparently 'can do little to rein in the Brussels Effect as long as the fundamental criteria for its emergence exist' (Bradford 2020, 263).

In the context of EU GSP, Bradford suggests that the export of 'regulatory standards' through trade preferences remains rather limited mainly because of challenges around enforcement. She laments that the EU infrequently suspends GSP preferences, despite repeated violations of political conditionalities and lack of compliance by GSP targets. Bradford ascribes 'the ineffectiveness of GSP provisions in fostering regulatory change' due to the European Commission's lack of exclusive competence in making decisions regarding preference withdrawals and the European Council's often dissenting views when it comes to politicising GSP (Bradford 2020, 85).

This reading, however, seems to misconstrue the complicated nature of GSP: that it is equally about positive inducements as it is about negative conditionality as a unilateral trade mechanism. We also need to clarify that the EU does not export 'regulatory standards' *per se* in cases of GSP withdrawals. Legally, the political conditionality exclusively applies to the GSP+ scheme where economic coercion relates to the promotion of 27 conventions around internationally recognised norms, not EU rules, from the prevention and punishment of genocide to anti-corruption (see Table 3). For the standard GSP and EBA schemes, what the EU promotes normatively appears less clear. The partial withdrawal of GSP from Cambodia, which is currently in force, has to do with 'serious and systematic violations' of human rights and international conventions although the latter is not technically codified as a political conditionality under EBA (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022).

The politics of regulatory change through GSP, properly understood, might unfold not through the mechanism of withdrawal, as Bradford suggests, but rather through the workings of global value chains or global production networks. On this point, she is not wrong. Take the market-making experience of Myanmar under the EBA regime, for example. Myanmar has recently become one of the most prolific EBA exporters following its economic rapprochement with the West in 2013. Exactly 95,7% of all Burmese exports, predominantly garments, qualify under EBA tariff preferences based on a 2017 evaluation report (EC42). The country had not previously specialised in garments destined for world markets (World Trade Organisation 2014). Rather than being hierarchically steered by the state, the Myanmar garment economy's multi-billion-euro exposure to EU regulatory norms can be traced as an artefact of the transnational transfer of EU-facing rules in Myanmar. According to research conducted for the ILO, foreign brands serve as 'one of the strongest drivers of change' in Myanmar's garment industry both in terms of manufacturing capabilities and socio-environmental standards (Boquiren et al. 2019, 10). For instance, apparel makers supplying to European firms tend to implement stricter requirements in occupational safety and health compared to producers that export to Japan and South Korea. Since the reinstatement of EBA preferences for Myanmar, EU firms like H&M and Adidas have expanded their outsourcing operations and supply agreements with Myanmar manufacturers and processing factories, mostly in and around Yangon (European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar 2018). As such, cloistered pockets within the thriving textile base in Myanmar de facto follow EU legal requirements on safeguarding consumer health and safety, including those that govern the use of chemicals²³ or wild plants/animals²⁴ in textile and garment production. Apart from overcoming these technical hurdles, Myanmar factories threaded to the global value chains of EU buyers and retailers are also expected to 'modernise' themselves by complying with labour standards²⁵ and eco-standards²⁶ that effectively conform to EU rules (SMART Myanmar 2015).

²³ EC Regulation 1907/2006 on Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH).

²⁴ EC Regulation 338/97 on the protection of species of wild fauna and flora by regulating trade therein.

²⁵ These include OHSAS 18000, SA8000, Business Social Compliance Initiative, Ethical Trading Initiative, Fair Ware Foundation, and Fair Labor Association (the last being preferred by H&M and Adidas).

²⁶ Commonly used marks in the EU include Oeko-Tex Standard 100 and European Eco-Label for Textile Products.

2.3.2 Exporting norms through trade?

Unlike the Brussels Effect's emphasis on norms as EU regulatory standards, the edited volume on *Global Governance through Trade* explores how the EU externalises trade and non-trade objectives through market mechanisms (Wouters et al. 2015). Citing general impasse at the multilateral level, they argue that the EU pursues global public goods because of its 'strong normative international agenda' (ibid., 3). This agenda emanates from the constitutional innovations in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, legally obliging the EU to promote its liberal-democratic norms and values in external relations, including trade (Larik 2015).

Analytically, the entire collection revolves around the earlier conceptual framework of 'Market Power Europe' wherein the EU externalises trade and non-trade objectives thanks to its economic weight, regulatory sophistication, and interest group mobilisation (Damro 2012). This notion explains why EU norms might sometimes transfer to non-EU settings. It contends that, in order to gain preferential access to the EU common market, external actors apply trade and non-trade norms effectively akin to those in the EU or adapt their behaviour in a manner that satisfies those norms. Hence, the transfer of specific trade and non-trade regulatory, policy, or technical measures is considered as 'dependent variables'. Unlike the much-cited 'Normative Power Europe' thesis (Manners 2002), it escapes the daunting challenge of empirically accounting for the EU's export of 'fuzzy' norms, such as democracy, good governance, human rights, or rule of law.

As such, *Global Governance through Trade* intends to address this 'analytical pitfall of inconsistency' as it 'emphasizes a narrower and more empirical tracing of the EU's externalization of trade and non-trade objectives' (Damro 2015, 39). The collection traces, among others, the export of 'social and environmental compliance' through unilateral conditional market access, including GSP. Beke and Hachez claim that the withdrawal of EU trade preferences from Burma/Myanmar between 1997 and 2013 failed to induce the desired political changes on reversing the violations of ILO Convention No. 29 on forced labour there (Beke and Hachez 2015). It is alleged that 'Burma must be viewed with caution, given the unique, pariah nature of that government, and the fiercely stubborn intransigence with which it resisted all international pressure of any kind' (Yap 2015, 239). Meanwhile, Yap argues that the threatened withdrawal of EU market access perks has influenced Bangladesh to adopt stricter labour standards following the

tragic Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in 2013. Facing a looming forced exit from the EBA initiative, Bangladesh has presumably acquiesced to the ‘sustainability compact’ with the EU and the ILO around (1) the respect for labour rights, in particular freedom of association and the right of collective bargaining, and (2) the structural integrity of buildings and occupational safety and health. Curiously, norms on ‘responsible business conduct’ on the part of European garment retailers were also on the table but did not involve any traceable commitments or outcomes. Therefore, ‘[the] threatened withdrawal of the EU GSP—combined with intense international pressure from a host of other sources—has so far only resulted in modest gains for workers in Bangladesh’ (Yap 2015, 241).

In *Global Governance through Trade*, the export of social and environmental compliance to non-EU settings through concrete market instruments is an empirical manifestation of the EU’s power to externalise its non-trade or normative agenda. But this rational–legal view is a bloodless reading of how policy ideas move across space and time. Even if we accept that the EU did induce Bangladesh to uplift its labour rights framework, a Eurocentric ‘export’ lens does not capture how differently sited actors push for, contest, translate, or resist institutional change (indeed it does not even concern itself with these dynamics).

In contrast to norm export, an *Asia Europe Journal* special issue investigates how norm-receivers have reacted to the ‘export’ of EU norms and values across Asia (Chaban, Masselot, and Vadura 2015) Yet it seems to me that, by invoking an export metaphor, this intervention nonetheless frames local responses as either a matter of adoption/acceptance or resistance/rejection. In the same issue, Orbie and Khorana (2015, 257) somewhat subvert this dichotomy when they underline ‘the local receptivity for EU norm import’, i.e., India’s political agency as a GSP ‘beneficiary’ in contesting and locally contextualising the EU’s promotion of liberal market norms (public procurement) and cosmopolitan norms (human rights) in their free trade negotiations (Orbie and Khorana 2015).

2.3.3 Neoliberal versus normative instincts

Political economy accounts have also informed a distinct strand of research on GSP. For Young and Peterson, a constellation of societal preferences determines the contours of EU trade policy

‘sub-systems’, including nonreciprocal trade preferences with claims to promoting ‘development’ in the global souths. For example, the sub-system dynamics around the EBA initiative ‘reflected the pattern of interest mobilization typical of a unilateral policy pursued with much weaker economic partners. Mobilization was unidirectional against liberalization and concentrated in a few sectors. Support for liberalization was due primarily to the normative desire to assist developing countries’ (Young and Peterson 2014, 193). The fact that the EU exerts power over GSP targets in an unequal relationship is not given further thought. Since this approach is intent on explaining the internal determinants of EU trade politics, the ‘targets’ of GSP and how they think about EU trade are methodologically bypassed altogether. It also ignores the fact that, for instance, EU garment goliaths like H&M and Adidas have been exploiting the GSP scheme in their sourcing operations, meaning that some economic actors in the EU may mobilise in favour of unilateral liberalisation or contest trade sanctions, contrary to the received assumption in the canon (see Young and Peterson 2014, 28).

In other words, the politicisation of GSP is by no means muted or monodirectional. The differentiation among standard GSP, GSP+, and EBA ‘beneficiaries’ implies complex and varied political economic considerations for the EU. Woolcock claims that normative considerations within the European Commission (i.e., DG Trade, DG International Partnerships) and the European Parliament tend to shape trade preferences for GSP targets more than commercial motivations. When it comes to more ‘advanced’ countries in the global souths, more pronounced commercial and normative interests are expected to drive trade preferences given competing interests for demanding mutual liberalisation, protecting EU economic interests from ‘harm’, addressing normative concerns (typically in terms of labour and environmental standards in third countries), as well as performing a tight balancing act between all of these considerations and that of the ‘developmental’ goals of GSP for ‘developing’ countries (Woolcock 2014). However, the pro-development discourse of DG Trade in terms of refocusing trade preferences for the ‘neediest’ and the ‘vulnerable’ becomes more tenuous in the face of claims that the differentiation among GSP targets is increasingly subordinated to market interests as part of a wider ‘reciprocity’ agenda and ‘offensive’ trade strategy of the EU in global markets (Siles-Brügge 2014a).

Beyond the question of market access, some scholars have also investigated the international political economy motivations behind the withdrawal of GSP ‘benefits’, especially in the context of the politics of global value chains. While Brussels barred Burma from the European GSP in the 1990s, the EU has been more reluctant to exert a politically motivated decision to use trade in order to change the human rights situation in Myanmar, following the 2017 Rohingya crisis. Poletti and Sicurelli stress that the commercial interests of EU investors and retailers that have located parts of their manufacturing activities in Myanmar since its earlier economic rapprochement with the West explain why the EU has not suspended the Southeast Asian country from the EBA initiative:

While in 1996, European retailers and investors withdrew from the country following accusations that the military junta were ignoring the use of forced labour, two decades later, they actively mobilised to promote a softer approach toward the military there being involved in the Rohingya genocide. As interviews and press sources confirm, despite the context of global attention on the human rights violations in Myanmar, European institutions proved themselves to be responsive to pressure from European investors and retailers when they opted not to withdraw the GSP. (Poletti and Sicurelli 2022, 54)

As such, casting doubt on ‘how valuable preferential access is, and whether developing countries can increase production and exports and thus take advantage of reduced barriers’ (Young and Peterson 2014, 194–95) obstructs the analytical possibility of problematising how many societies in the global souths are rendered *governable* by the EU through the GSP regime.

2.3.4 Suspensions as sanctions

Read as foreign policy, suspending preferential access to the EU GSP regime from ‘unruly’ target countries has been studied as an act of effectively sanctioning those countries. Legally speaking, the withdrawal of *unilateral* trade preferences is not technically a sanction, as EU policymakers often insist. However, there is a scholarly consensus around interpreting GSP withdrawals as sanctions because (1) the EU asserts that trade preferences may be politicised as a ‘coercive’ tool aiming to alter the behaviour of others and (2) the targets of GSP withdrawals themselves often view this politicisation as a form of trade sanctions (Portela 2010; Cao 2018; Meissner 2021; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Poletti and Sicurelli 2022). The extant literature has tended to investigate GSP sanctions in terms of their effectiveness, their coherence with other EU policy

domains, or the conditions under which they ensue. However, more recent writings have started to query the hitherto unquestioned premise of leveraging GSP withdrawals as a means for economic coercion against third countries.

First, Portela purports, in an early contribution, that the outcome of the very few instances of GSP withdrawals against Burma in the 1990s and Belarus in 2006 has been ‘nil’. The EU failed in bringing about the abolition of forced labour in Burma and the reversal of violations of ILO Conventions 87 and 98 around the freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining in Belarus. It is hypothesised that ‘it may well be the status of the suspended beneficiaries as targets of CFSP [Common Foreign and Security Policy] sanctions that prevents them from taking any steps toward regaining GSP access’ (Portela 2010, 157). This situation is deemed problematic because regaining access to the GSP regime is decided by the European Council through qualified majority voting, whereas lifting foreign policy sanctions requires unanimous approval by the European Council. This ineffectiveness has led others to cast serious doubts about the EU’s normative credentials in global trade as ‘the stick of political conditionality is a dog that has barked only on the rarest of occasions’ (Young and Peterson 2014, 196). As such, a key finding of this literature is that ‘GSP withdrawals have the worst record of success of all EU sanctions. [...] The low N does not allow any meaningful exploration of the reasons behind this failure’ (Portela 2010, 160).

Second, the coherence of EU GSP sanctions with other dimensions of EU foreign policies has been put into question. This strand does not ask whether EU trade sanctions are effective or not, but argue that it is in the first place difficult for the EU to use trade as foreign policy because of ‘the institutional compartmentalisation of the EU’s system of external policy, and further [impediments] by WTO law, export-oriented business interests and the ideological pro-liberalisation bias of the Commission’ (Bossuyt, Orbie, and Drieghe 2020, 58).

Third, some scholars are interested in determining the conditions under which EU GSP sanctions emerge. For example, the EU seems to suspend trade preferences from ‘problematic’ countries only in the presence of (1) foreign policy sanctions imposed by the European Council *and* (2) ILO Commission of Inquiry that has condemned a given GSP country for failing to implement core

labour standards, as in the cases of Burma/Myanmar, Belarus, and Sri Lanka. In the absence of both conditions, the EU has considered but ultimately failed to impose GSP sanctions against Pakistan, China, Russia, and India (Portela and Orbie 2014). Additionally, Meissner has attempted to resolve an empirical puzzle as to why the European Parliament has invested political resources in requesting trade sanctions against some so-called ‘noncompliant’ GSP targets (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Tajikistan) but not others (Armenia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Paraguay, and Vietnam). Using qualitative comparative analysis, Meissner maintains that two sufficient conditions need to be present to trigger mobilisation by the European Parliament: (1) the ‘salience’ of the target in EU development cooperation *and* (2) when the target in question has ‘poor human development performance’ and is not considered a security ally for the EU. This, therefore, implies that the violation of norms considered important in the context of GSP is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for EU parliamentarians to demand trade sanctions against norm ‘breakers’ (Meissner 2021).

Last but not least, the relationship between the EU’s normative trade agenda and GSP sanctions has been critiqued from the standpoints of morality and legitimacy. It is, however, sometimes assumed that the cessation of trade preferences may be inconsequential for some countries than others: ‘To the extent that GSP withdrawal can be considered a sanction, it is a mild one, as it implies no more than the re-establishment of normal trade flows’ (Portela 2010, 153). Yet the combined experiences of Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar under the EBA regime point to a completely opposite conclusion: that GSP sanctions may ultimately be injurious to millions of workers in the global souths at the receiving end of EU trade preferences. In this context, Bosse raises moral questions about an unchallenged assumption in using GSP for political ends: whether ‘the EU has the inherent moral authority as a normative power to act upon its principles, including the possibility of using coercive actions, such as sanctions or military force, in the pursuit of normative goals’ in the absence of UN Security Council mandates (Bosse 2022, 17). For Bosse, the short answer is: no, it doesn’t *yet*. In the context of the issue of democratic backsliding in Cambodia in 2018, the legitimacy of EU GSP sanctions has been questioned. Cao argues that a ‘withdrawal from the EBA is likely to harm vulnerable groups that are not responsible for the

policies and actions leading to the adoption of these sanctions and raise a significant ethical debate’ (Cao 2018).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has advanced a critical reading of the EU’s role in global governance through trade. In particular, I have considered four distinct strands of political science writings that investigate how the EU is thought to externalise norms in its preferential trade relations with the global souths: (1) because of the Brussels Effect, (2) by way of policy export, and (3) as determined by a given constellation of political economy interests jostling for a more normative versus a more market-oriented GSP, and (4) through the imposition of sanctions. I contend that such writings do not only often sidestep the political subjecthood of people that those norms supposedly claim to transform, but also fail to denaturalise the worldviews of, and the unequal power relations (re)produced by, those engaged in articulating a more neoliberal or normative EU trade policy. Eurocentric colonial/modern logics underpin the scholarly discourse of global governance through trade in EU external relations. As such, the paper has cleared the ground for a decolonial critique of EU trade policy, with an emphasis on GSP. A decolonial critique would puncture mainstream EU trade policy discourses by explicating how the EU GSP regime inscribes the global souths into colonial/modern logics of governing, ordering, and intervening, not as a depoliticised device that benefits the EU’s market relations with ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries.

In political science, García reminds us that ‘a greater understanding of the “other” in EU trade policy becomes a necessity’ (García 2018, 72). Despite its increasingly normative and politicised slant, the EU GSP regime at large remains opaque to ‘interpretive researchers who have only recently discovered EU trade policy’ (Bollen 2018, 197). Decolonial critique matters for the interpretive political study of GSP and EU trade policy generally for several reasons. First, a decolonial critique departs from a ‘scientific’ view of EU trade policy as to ‘how all the atoms collide to result in a Europe that is both liberal and protectionist, assertive and passive, global and parochial’ (Young and Peterson 2014, 44). By doing so, it contributes to critical knowledges on the EU in the world by challenging these dichotomies and interrogating ‘the exploitative, patriarchal, ostensibly civilizing (but more accurately, orientaling), and excluding effects that

the EU has had in its engagement with subaltern and subordinate regions outside of Western Europe' (Bailey 2010, 46). GSP is, therefore, never neutral or depoliticised, contrary to what prevailing scholarly and political discourses would have us believe.

For some, the EU's entanglements in global governance 'cannot be confused with the phantom of a European world hegemony (including hard and soft power), which is but a dream of a few nostalgics harking back to the age of empires and is far more commonly seen as a nightmare by many Europeans and non-Europeans alike' (Telò 2009, 25–26). Yet other ways of interpreting the social and political world puncture this presupposition by unmasking the persistence of Eurocentric colonial/modern logics within EU economic relations with ex-colonies and more broadly the 'tiers monde' (Staeger 2016; Langan 2018; Haastrup 2020; Langan and Price 2020; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). As such, a decolonial critique provokes unquestioned assumptions about EU trade policy and exposes how hierarchical power relations operate through the policy world of EU GSP. To that end, we must turn to questioning the EU's historical and political discourses on generalised preferences.

PART II: RECASTING THE HISTORICAL DISCOURSE ON EU GSP

3. Pax bruxellana: Re-historicising the European Economic Community's discourse on preferential trade in South–North relations

3.1 Introduction

In 1971, the Third World prevailed, to an extent, in its struggle to gain preferential market access to the European Economic Community (EEC) without giving any market access concessions in return. By instigating a generalised scheme of preferences (GSP), the EEC acquiesced to long-standing demands by so-called ‘developing’ countries on obtaining special and differential treatment for their semi-manufactured and manufactured export goods in industrialised markets within the framework of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The Community characterised its unilateral GSP policy as ‘an act of faith and solidarity towards disadvantaged countries’²⁷ and ‘a real turning point in international trade relations’.²⁸ For the EEC Commission, GSP generated ‘an essential political significance’ especially in terms of concerted actions towards seeking and implementing more deliberate measures in the name of development.²⁹ What is more, even western liberal observers presumed that, with the rule-breaking generalised preferences, ‘old hang-ups about neo-colonialism are more remote when the [target] countries can deal with the EEC commission in Brussels rather than the national capitals of European ex-imperialist powers’.³⁰

Although initially conceived as a temporary policy, the GSP policy remains firmly intact today and has survived numerous reforms in terms of geographical scope, product coverage, and political conditionality (Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018, 153). For over 50 years now, it has been through the GSP regime that the European Union (EU) has ordered and reordered its trade relations with the global souths. Indeed, GSP in its contemporary context, as I discuss in Part III, is often read both

²⁷ « un acte de foi et de solidarité vis-à-vis des pays défavorisés » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, 7 juillet 1971, Pas de cadeau pour le tiers monde, Journal de Genève, Jasmine Audemars.

²⁸ « Il s’agit également d’un véritable tournant dans les relations commerciales internationales » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, juin 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

²⁹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172, 19-10-1970, Intervention faite par le représentant de la Commission lors de la 1724^{ème} réunion du Conseil Économique et Social (reprise de la 49^{ème} session d’l’ECOSOC).

³⁰ ‘Eastern feelers’, *The Economist*, 6 September 1975.

messianically and technocratically as ‘the crown jewel’ of EU trade policy, plucking poor countries out of poverty and enticing them to respect their obligations to the liberal international order.

Yet these official interpretations of the GSP policy ‘elide the larger historical and political contexts of colonialism and asymmetric power in international economic relations’ (Shaffer and Apea 2005, 491). As I have established in the introduction, EU trade policy scholarship tends to centre European agency in narrating how the generalised preferences came to exist. The fact that the EEC opened its markets preferentially to Third World exports in response to UNCTAD stays front and centre. This apolitical framing distorts the struggles of the Third World in reimagining a different global economic order whose main presuppositions went over and above unilateral tariff liberalisation on the part of industrialised economies. At the same time, contemporary political discourses generally take an ahistorical view of GSP. Indeed, some EU trade policy elites, including my interlocutor at DG Trade, tend to delink GSP from Europe’s colonial relations (Interviews 22; 30; 32; 34). They insist that GSP has nothing to do with colonial relations and serves more as a generous unilateral offering by the EU for the benefit of the global souths. Any critical inquiry into the EU GSP would be remiss without recovering and problematising these erasures.

In this context, I re-historicise and, therefore, re-politicise the EU GSP regime as a discursive battleground over the political significance of generalised preferences. Re-historicising GSP means contradicting the centrality of Western Europe by foregrounding the role of the Third World in articulating why generalised preferences *had* to exist in the first place. Doing so re-politicises the way we see GSP not as a policy based on generosity but the persistence of colonial/modern relations between Western European powers and the Third World in the decades following nominal decolonisation. It is important to point out that this chapter does not narrate a history of generalised preferences in general.³¹ Nor does it claim to offer a comprehensive historical account of the origins of the EU’s GSP policy in particular. Rather it contextualises the Community’s

³¹ See Breda dos Santos, Farias, and Cunha (2005) for a historical account of generalised preferences in the context of GATT and WTO and Shaffer and Apea (2005) for a historical and political discussion of generalised preferences from the perspective of international economic law.

discourse of interdependence with the Third World at a time when the latter demanded special and differential treatment in their trading relations with their past—and in some cases present—colonial masters.

In my view, there is room to undertake this interpretive exercise for at least three reasons. First, studies on EU trade and development policies have tended to focus more on the Yaoundé and Lomé conventions (Grilli 1993; Holland 2002). In these accounts, the origins and subsequent discursive contestations of the GSP regime figure rather sparsely and are discussed insofar as they relate to ‘associated’ African, Caribbean and Pacific countries and territories under the two previously mentioned preferential trade agreements. Second, historiographies of the Community’s GSP remain understudied, even though archival documents on this particular EU policy have been made publicly available already since the 2000s following the EU’s 30-year rule on declassifying historical documents.³² While past studies may have had to work with secondary or interview data, we now have the benefit of ‘ransacking’ the historical archives to scrutinise primary data not only on the beginnings of the GSP policy in the sixties and early seventies but also the subsequent attempts to translate it into policy in the ensuing decade. Last but not least, re-historicising GSP expands the weight of critical interpretations today on the EU’s economic relations with the global souths. It challenges official policy discourses that ‘shape not only the way scholars (as well as those outside the academic community) see a particular set of issues, but also what kinds of questions about these issues are considered legitimate for scholars to ask and what kinds of actions leaders and their publics are supposed to take’ (Lynch 2006, 294).

Drawing mainly on research conducted in the Historical Archives of the European Commission in Brussels (HAEC), which I read intertextually vis-à-vis documents produced by G77, WTO, and UNCTAD, the rest of the chapter proceeds in four parts. First, I discuss different historiographical accounts of the EEC GSP policy against the backdrop of Third World calls for radically reforming the Western-centric global economic order in the 1960s and 1970s. Second, I situate GSP in the wider historical milieu of South–North relations of the sixties and seventies. Third, I analyse the official discourse that the EEC articulated as a ‘responsible’ global actor as it derogated from the

³² Council Regulation (EEC, Euratom) No 354/83 of 1 February 1983 concerning the opening to the public of the historical archives of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community.

long-standing norm of the most-favoured-nation principle in international commerce. Finally, I close with some reflexions on Johan Galtung's idea of 'pax bruxellana' and how it links to extant historiographical accounts of GSP and wider ongoing conversations today on overcoming Eurocentrism in European Studies.

3.2 End of an era or more of the same?

Historiographical accounts of the Community's generalised preferences offer different interpretations about their political significance in global trade relations. To my knowledge, EU trade and development policy studies have, however, not historicised the EEC GSP regime as such. Canonical writings narrate the origins of GSP often in apolitical terms, in broad brush strokes, or as appendaged to more preferential policies deemed higher up in the so-called 'pyramid of preferences' whose apex was reserved for Western Europe's ex-colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific (Grilli 1993; Holland 2002; Holland and Doidge 2012; Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018). Curiously, historiographical interest in the EU GSP pales by comparison with the Yaoundé, Lomé, and Cotonou agreements (cf. Hurt 2003; Langan 2018; Drieghe 2020). The beginnings of GSP in the sixties and seventies as a policy 'indicative of a broadening of Europe's external relations' (Holland 2002, 32) beyond Belgo–Franco 'zones of influence' tend to be taken for granted in the scholarly literature. That said, I map out in this section different interpretations of the EEC GSP regime and its significance in contextualising South–North differences in global economic relations.

Standard narrations of the EEC's GSP policy often, and rightly so, trace its origins to UNCTAD where 'developing' countries advocated, among other reforms, for preferential access to industrialised markets for their manufactures and semi-manufactures (Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018). Yet the framing immediately shifts to Europe: the fact that it was the EEC that first took on UNCTAD demands and unilaterally opened its markets to Third World imports without asking anything in return. The Community introduced GSP 'in response to the gaps in coverage of European trade policy with the developing world' (Holland 2002, 145). In this framing, Europe

overflows with generosity. In this framing, the political agency of the ‘Group of 77’ (G77)³³ within UNCTAD blurs in the background. Received accounts tend to centre the EEC’s autonomous act of opening its markets to exports from the global souths. This is problematic because it flattens the historical presence of G77 and detaches GSP from wider calls to redress the ‘injustice and neglect of centuries’ in the global order.³⁴ More bluntly: centuries of European colonialism, that is. Any critical attempt to re-historicise the EU GSP regime, therefore, would be remiss without contextualising it within the South–North politics of the time: the struggle for a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

Proponents of preferential market access for the global souths to rich world markets emphasised the need to foster South–North interdependence. This interdependence logic reflected the need to rewrite the principles and rules that had by far underpinned the post-war Western-centric global economic order embodied by General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) and Bretton Woods institutions. Demands for a different global economic architecture found expression under the banner of the NIEO, which articulated ‘the insistence of the countries of the third world on belonging to, and being treated as, an integral part of the global order. It is a reflection of their unwillingness to continue to remain on the periphery of such an order’ (Corea 1977, 178). Third World governments considered generalised preferences as part of this different world order. Within UNCTAD, G77 advocated for preferential treatment for their exported manufactures to industrialised economies, among others. They regarded generalised preferences as a way to overcome reliance on primary commodities. In this sense, the Community’s GSP regime in 1971 ‘represented a substantial concession to middle-income developing countries on their way towards industrialization’ (Grilli 1993, 252). In particular, this policy was thought to introduce ‘greater

³³ The founding members of G77 included: Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Burma, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ceylon, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Congo (Brazzaville), Congo (Leopoldville), Costa Rica, Cyprus, Dahomey, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania, Mexico, Morocco, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Republic of Viet-Nam, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Uganda, United Arab Republic, United Republic of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, Upper Volta, Uruguay, Venezuela, Yemen, and Yugoslavia. Today, G77 houses 134 member states. See: <https://www.g77.org/doc/members.html>.

³⁴ Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Developing Countries made at the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Geneva, 15 June 1964, <https://www.g77.org/doc/Joint%20Declaration.html>.

balance into the place of Latin America (and Asia) in the Community's relations with the developing world' (Holland and Doidge 2012, 157).

In contrast to the interdependence view, *dependencia* thinking very early on critiqued the EEC GSP policy. It was read as perpetuating the 'pyramid of preferences' in favour of some Third World countries over others (Holland 2002, 146). Furthermore, Galtung castigated the Community's divisive approach to distinguishing between associated countries under Yaoundé and Lomé as opposed to non-associated countries under GSP 'as an extension in time of the "particular relation" prevailing between colonial countries and their colonies, and not evaporating overnight with the disappearance of traditional colonialism' (Galtung 1973, 77). Furthermore, a world-systems perspective understood GSP as nothing more than a vehicle of exploitation through the hierarchical division of labour wherein the 'less developed' periphery provided goods at a much lower level of processing compared to the 'developed' centre (Galtung 1973, 71). Even though the Community and the Third World may seem to be on a new footing, GSP would 'do little, if anything, to erode the dependency status of the periphery or the elite social structure that simultaneously feeds on ties with the metropole and blocks the social restructuring necessary for real economic development' (Cocks 1980, 28).

3.3 Generalised preferences in South–North relations

In the context of South–North dialogues in the sixties and seventies on reforming the global economic order, I ask how the EEC articulated a discourse of interdependence as a responsible global power as it broke faith with one of the long-standing foundations of the 'liberal' world trading order: the most-favoured-nation norm. Becoming the first industrial power to legislate generalised preferences in 1971 after protracted international negotiations, the EEC consistently stressed its strong sense of responsibility to the Third World at large, to its African associates, and to the Community itself in terms of forging interdependence and burden-sharing in and through the GSP policy world.

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the most definitive decades in the history of the EU's preferential trade relations with the global souths. During this period, 'decolonisation' forged ahead. As more

and more colonies formally gained independence from Western European colonial powers, the necessity to redefine the international economic order preoccupied South–North relations. In 1963, the EEC Six signed the Yaoundé Convention to foster free trade with 18 ex-colonies in Africa. Central to this ‘special’ trade relationship was the policy of ‘reverse preferences’. Reverse preferences mean that the granting of preferential market access for African exporters to EEC markets was conditional upon the granting of preferential market access for EEC exporters to African markets (Kreinin 1972, 161). Meanwhile, the United Nations (UN) designated the sixties and the seventies as ‘development decades’ with a view to improving standards of living in Third World countries and accelerating their growth based on earnings from trade.³⁵ While the West experienced remarkable economic expansion since the end of World War II, the global souths suffered from unequal exchange, continued dependence on volatile commodity markets, and restrictions on market access that further inhibited their efforts to expand their trade in manufactured goods (Corea 1977). This was the cruel world GSP was born into.

Short-changed by the prevailing economic order, the Third World joined forces and articulated demands to reconstruct that order. In the early seventies, these demands found a coherent expression in the G77’s call for a New International Economic Order, which insisted on, among others, creating a global system of preferences for all manufactures exported by the global souths to industrialised markets (Toye 2003, 1760). In 1973, the Community enlarged for the first time with the accession of Denmark, Ireland, and the UK. UK membership further cemented the necessity of keeping GSP as Britain brought with itself new trading relations with ex-colonies and dependent territories. However, the Arab–Israeli war in the same year triggered energy supply and economic difficulties globally. Without jeopardising GSP, this crisis reinforced the necessity of trade preferences as a cushion for those most economically affected. Against the geopolitical milieu of the Cold War hovering in the background, the EEC stressed the importance of the burden it was carrying for the Third World and pushed other industrialised powers, notably the US, to share that burden.

³⁵ Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30; Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, THIRD SESSION, Santiago de Chile, 13 April to 21 May 1972, Volume I, Report and Annexes, TD/180, Vol. I.

3.3.1 UNCTAD I in Geneva and the Brasseur plan

Mounting pressures for *generalised* preferences gradually crystallised in the context of two UNCTAD conferences in the 1960s. Many peripheralised countries and newly independent ex-colonies recognised the imperative to reorganise the post-war economic order embodied by the Havana Charter of 1948 and to ‘build a new order with a view to solving the serious problems of trade and development that beset the world’.³⁶ UNCTAD insisted that the old order by virtue of GATT had disproportionately served the economic interests of industrialised countries more than it had the ‘developing’ world. The zeitgeist of the first UNCTAD Conference in Geneva in 1964, in the words of Argentinian development economist and Secretary-General Raúl Prébisch, hinged on a clear political conviction that ‘the prosperous countries of the world should not neglect the problems of the economic periphery, where two-thirds of the world’s population live in very precarious conditions’.³⁷ To this end, the establishment of a generalised system of preferences stemmed as one of the key principles from the Conference. General Principle Eight implored that ‘developed countries should grant concessions to all developing countries and extend to developing countries all concessions they grant to one another and should not, in granting these or other concessions, require any concessions in return from developing countries’.³⁸

In general, EEC member states publicly endorsed the notion of opening the Common Market preferentially to the semi-processed and processed exports originating from G77 countries, although this prospect weighed more heavily for Belgium and France.³⁹ Germany linked the idea of generalised trade preferences to the importance of reducing the dependence of Third World

³⁶ Towards a New Trade Policy for Development, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30.

³⁷ Statement by Mr Raúl Prébisch, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development at the Third Plenary Meeting, held on 24 March 1964, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

³⁸ Second Part: A Consolidation of the Recommendations of the Conference, General Principle Eight, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30.

³⁹ HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, 18 avril 1965, Note introductive : Réunion du Groupe des questions commerciales du 3 mai 1965.

countries on exporting primary commodities.⁴⁰ Like Germany, the Netherlands supported the thesis of generalised preferences in favour of ‘developing’ countries (Franck 1985, 193). In a more measured stance, Italy signalled its openness to ‘economic co-operation based on real solidarity between the peoples’ but cautioned that ‘we must rid ourselves of generalizations and even exaggerations’. From Italy’s point of view, special measures were called for only in exceptional circumstances to facilitate ‘developing’ country exports to Italy. For them, the ‘real’ difficulties pertained less to market access for manufactures and more to overcoming marketing and product quality issues in order to ‘avoid recourse to protectionist measures’.⁴¹ Meanwhile, France expressed sympathy with calls to revise international trade rules and, accordingly, with Third World countries that could not ‘normally’ compete in global markets and ‘suffer simultaneously from the handicap of technical backwardness and the inadequate financial means or commercial networks’. French finance and economic affairs minister Valéry Giscard d’Estaing stressed that ‘[the] force, persistence, and widespread nature of such requests reveal a state of affairs to which one cannot shut one’s eyes’. France strongly endorsed the ‘Brasseur plan’ penned by Belgium and favoured by the EEC Commission.⁴²

The Brasseur plan, however, departed glaringly from the idea of *generalising* tariff preferences for *all* ‘developing’ countries as envisioned under General Principle Eight. Within UNCTAD, the proposal for generalised preferences originated from Latin American countries as they sought preferential access for their exports to the US. Latin American countries defended the necessity of a generalised scheme by arguing that existing ‘imperial’ preferences for many African, Asian, and Caribbean economies under the British Commonwealth, French/EEC, Soviet Bloc, and US schemes effectively discriminated against their economic prospects in international trade (Wall

⁴⁰ Statement by H.E. Mr. Kurt Schmucker, Federal Minister of Economy, Head of the Delegation of the Federal Republic of Germany at the Eighth Plenary Meeting, held on 26 March 1964, pp. 191-192, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

⁴¹ Statement by H.E. Mr. Bernardo Mattarella, Minister for Foreign Trade of Italy, Head of the Delegation at the Eighth Plenary Meeting, held on 26 March 1964, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

⁴² Statement by H.E. Mr. Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs of France, Head of the Delegation at the Fourth Plenary Meeting, held on 24 March 1964, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

1971; Toye 2003). In fact, the so-called ‘Group B’ countries from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), including the EEC Six, attempted unsuccessfully to soften the language of General Principle Eight with the following amendment on *negotiating* rather than *generalising* preferential treatment: ‘When granting concessions to developing countries in tariff negotiations, developed countries should not require equivalent concessions from them’.⁴³ For the Community, generalising tariff preferences posed immense ‘technical’ troubles. Instead, the Commission called for a ‘pragmatic and practical approach’:

I have no reservations about publicly declaring my Commission’s unanimous support for the Brasseur plan. We feel that the Brasseur plan is a good one and that it is an extremely practical way of dealing with the question of preferences. It is true that the plan is based on selective, temporary, degressive preferences and I imagine that Mr Brasseur would be the first to agree with my view that it is less ambitious than a world plan. Nevertheless, I shall not attempt to conceal my fear that we shall not be able, during the two months this Conference lasts, to develop a world plan applicable to the entire system of preferences, to be operated by all the developed countries for the benefit of all the developing countries.⁴⁴

In Geneva, the Belgo–Franco delegations defended the principle of selective, temporary and degressive preferences. Under ‘degressive’ preferences, the preferential treatment would be reserved solely for manufactured goods that G77 countries were not able to produce competitively. In addition, negotiations between the EEC and eligible exporting countries were envisioned in order to determine the number of products that could be treated preferentially within a specific timeframe. Belgian external trade minister Maurice Brasseur himself framed the proposal as ‘a happy example of a half-way house between opposing views’.⁴⁵ This opposition alluded, of course, to the advocacy for a generalised system of preferences by the Third World and the resistance to it by major industrialised countries, most notably the US.

A few years later at the Punta Del Este Conference of 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated that the most-favoured-nation principle ‘may not always permit developing countries to advance

⁴³ Second Part: A Consolidation of the Recommendations of the Conference, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30.

⁴⁴ Statement by Jean Rey, EEC Representative at the 19th Plenary Meeting, 6 April 1964, UNCTAD, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

⁴⁵ HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, 18 avril 1965, Extrait de l’expose de M. Maurice Brasseur, Ministre du Commerce Extérieure et de l’Assistance Technique de Belgique, devant l’Assemblée plénière de la CNUCED.

as rapidly as desired’, signalling Washington’s willingness to consider offering generalised preferences at the behest of Latin American countries and the Third World at large. However, the US assailed the reverse preferences enjoyed by the EEC on African markets, insisting this special market access ran ‘contrary to our mutual efforts to develop common policies applying to all developing countries’.⁴⁶

That said, the EEC deemed the half-way house exemplified by the Brasseur plan necessary to support the diversification of manufacturing in G77 countries through greater export opportunities at the same time ‘without affecting the smooth running of national and international markets’. It is in this context that the Community understood its responsibilities towards UNCTAD within a new order of economic cooperation based on interdependence.⁴⁷

In the end, UNCTAD I adopted the principle of generalised preferences by a vote of 78 to 11, with 23 abstentions. All EEC member states, however, abstained in spite of their initial endorsement of this principle in their opening policy statements and because of the different orientation of the Brasseur plan about the impracticalities of administering a more global approach to preferences.⁴⁸ As such, G77 opined that only limited progress had been made regarding preferential treatment for exported manufactures.⁴⁹ Despite recognising the role of generalised preferences as far as industrial exports were concerned, the Conference concluded that it was ‘necessary to continue with great persistence to seek the best way of translating this recognition promptly into concrete and effective action’.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, Aide-memoire from the United States Mission to the European Communities, concerning the generalised preferences for ‘developing’ countries, 2 June 1967.

⁴⁷ Statement by H.E. Mr. Maurice Brasseur, Minister for External Trade of the Kingdom of Belgium, President of the Council of Ministers of the European Economic Community, at the Thirty-sixth Plenary Meeting, held on 16 June 1964, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

⁴⁸ Second Part: A Consolidation of the Recommendations of the Conference, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30.

⁴⁹ Group of 77, 15 June 1964, Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Developing Countries made at the Conclusion of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, <https://www.g77.org/doc/Joint%20Declaration.html>.

⁵⁰ The Significance of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume II, POLICY STATEMENTS, E/CONF.46/141, Vol. II.

3.3.2 Interregnum: G77 in Algiers

Following Geneva and anticipating the next UNCTAD conference, G77 countries convened in Algiers in October 1967 against a backdrop of growing socio-economic inequalities across the South–North divide. This assembly culminated in the Charter of Algiers, which G77 regarded as an expression of Third World solidarity. The charter stitched together the African declaration of Algiers, the Bangkok declaration of Asian countries, and the Charter of Tequendama of Latin American countries.⁵¹

Algiers articulated a comprehensive programme of action around commodity problems and policies, expansion of exports of manufactures and semi-manufactures, development financing, international shipping, trade expansion and economic integration among the global souths, and other general trade policy issues. On the expansion of exports, G77 reiterated the imperative of instituting a generalised scheme of preferences:

At the second session of the Conference there should be negotiations which should lead to the conclusion of an agreement on a general system of tariff preferences on a non-discriminatory and non-reciprocal basis. The agreement should provide for unrestricted and duty-free access to the markets of all the developed countries for all manufactures and semi-manufactures from all developed countries.⁵²

Again, the *generalised* basis of this principle collided with the policy direction suggested by OECD’s Special Group on UNCTAD issues that ‘preferential treatment should in principle be accorded to all manufactured and semi-manufactured products exported by any country claiming developing status; other products could be included on a case-by-case basis’.⁵³ In contrast to the discriminatory character of this proposal, the Charter of Algiers stressed the principles of non-discrimination and non-reciprocity in South–North trading relations. Algiers envisioned a global system of preferences that applied to *all* manufactures and semi-manufactures, including processed

⁵¹ HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, 21 novembre 1967, CEE, Le Conseil, R/1673/67 (COMER 219), Note d’information, Remise de la ‘Charte d’Alger’ au Président du Conseil de la CEE.

⁵² Group of 77, 10–25 October 1967, First Ministerial Meeting of the Group of 77: Charter of Algiers, <https://www.g77.org/doc/algier~1.htm>.

⁵³ Summary of statement by Mr. Thorkil Kristensen, Secretary-General of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, SECOND SESSION, New Delhi, 1 February–29 March 1968, Volume I, Report and Annexes, TD/97, Vol. I.

and semi-processed primary products, from *all* ‘developing’ countries, with special attention to ‘least developed’ ones. Importantly, this new system implied the radical termination of the EEC’s existing ‘imperial’ trade preferences reserved for the ex-colonies of Belgium and France. However, G77 argued that the new scheme should accord equivalent preferences to this group of countries and include special measures by ex-colonial powers to rectify any possible detrimental consequences upon this group of ‘developing’ countries under the new system. Going forward, G77 mandated ‘goodwill missions’ to other groupings within UNCTAD. These missions were ‘entrusted with the task of informing and persuading [...] so as to contribute to the creation of the best possible conditions for negotiations on the programme of action at the second session of the Conference’.⁵⁴

3.3.3 UNCTAD II in New Delhi and breaking the most-favoured-nation norm

Following this interregnum, the second UNCTAD Conference in 1968 deemed that the principle of generalised preferences was ‘mature for consideration’, not least due to G77 persistence and OECD receptiveness. In New Delhi, industrialised economies ‘now took a positive attitude towards the strong desire of developing countries for a general preference system, as witnessed by the agreement reached by all OECD countries and Finland on broad lines of the subject’.⁵⁵ The Conference unanimously passed a resolution that:

the objectives of the generalized nonreciprocal, non-discriminatory system of preferences in favour of the developing countries, including special measures in favour of the least advanced among the developing countries, should be:

- (a) To increase their export earnings;
- (b) To promote their industrialization;
- (c) To accelerate their rates of economic growth.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Group of 77, 10–25 October 1967, First Ministerial Meeting of the Group of 77: Charter of Algiers, <https://www.g77.org/doc/algier~1.htm>.

⁵⁵ Part Three: A Summary of the Debate, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, SECOND SESSION, New Delhi, 1 February - 29 March 1968, Volume I, Report and Annexes, TD/97, Vol. I; HAEC, 18 May 1969, BAC 3/1978 No. 1172, Déclaration du Représentant de la Communauté Économique Européenne a la deuxième session du Comité spécial des Préférences de la CNUCED.

⁵⁶ Resolution 21 on the Expansion and Diversification of Exports of Manufactures and Semi-manufactures of Developing Countries, 26 March 1968, 77th Plenary Meeting, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, SECOND SESSION, New Delhi, 1 February - 29 March 1968, Volume I, Report and Annexes, TD/97, Vol. I.

The agreement in New Delhi demanded a derogation from one of the long-standing norms buttressing the liberal world trading order: the most-favoured-nation principle. This norm, codified at the Havana Conference of 1947–48 as Article I of the 1947 GATT, stipulates that ‘any advantage, favour, privilege or immunity granted by any contracting party to any product originating in or destined for any other country shall be accorded immediately and unconditionally to the like product originating in or destined for the territories of all other contracting parties’.⁵⁷ The most-favoured-nation norm upholds reciprocity and eliminates ‘discriminatory’ measures in international commerce with respect to all members of the world trading order. The notion of generalised preferences contradicted these *erga omnes* principles. Implementing the UNCTAD resolution, therefore, necessitated a waiver from the most-favoured-nation obligation in the GATT system (Bartels 2005).

The Community viewed this consensus as ‘a real turning point in international trade relations’. It institutionalised generalised preferences as one of the major contributions of the international community to the elaboration of a strategy for the second United Nations development decade. Additionally, it emphasised that, for the first time, the industrialised world—including the Community and its member states which had persevered in playing an essential role—were united among themselves and with the Third World to seek and implement deliberate international measures in favour of development, measures that correspond to a radical departure from the most-favoured-nation norm.⁵⁸ In a cable to the EEC Commission from New Delhi, Vittorio di Martino, the Community’s representative to the UNCTAD Conference, reported that the clarity, the coherence, and the good balance of the Community’s policy positions throughout negotiations had undeniably enabled the Community to record a much more notable success in contrast to other industrialised powers:

It is in this context that I made a statement on behalf of the Community to express our satisfaction with the results that have been achieved because of the deep sense of responsibility that the Community feels for the fact that it was the promoter of this idea of preferences. Finally, I insisted on the fact that the Community does not want these generalized preferences to give rise to

⁵⁷ Article I: General Most-Favoured-Nation Treatment, The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT 1947), https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/gatt47_01_e.htm#articleI.

⁵⁸ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, juin 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

differences or even opposition between the member countries of UNCTAD and in particular between the developing countries themselves.⁵⁹

As such, the discursive basis of EEC policy on special and differential treatment in global trade congealed into a *deep sense of responsibility* incumbent upon itself as ‘the main protagonist of international commerce’ and the world’s leading importer of goods from the global souths. Aside from this ‘general’ responsibility towards G77 countries, the Community also stressed the ‘special responsibility’ it had assumed in carefully calibrating its GSP policy with regard to associated African and Malagasy states and EEC economic operators themselves.⁶⁰

3.4 Western Europe’s burden

On 1 July 1971, the Community inaugurated the world’s first-ever system of generalised preferences ‘as a factor of peace in the world’. In derogating from the most-favoured-nation norm, the EEC articulated a discourse on the necessity of its more deliberate and global role as a ‘responsible’ policy actor able to balance its commitments and obligations towards the Third World, towards associated African and Malagasy states, and towards the Community itself:

‘The Community intends to assume its role responsibly’, the representative of the Community, Mr Vittorio di Martino, forcefully declared at UNCTAD on several occasions. This responsibility flows quite naturally from the ever-increasing place occupied by the Community in the foreign trade of less advantaged countries and also from the commitments it has entered into with a large number of these countries. This responsibility entails an effort of creative imagination that is, in many ways, daring while remaining realistic and balanced.

[...]

Ultimately, the implementation of the Community’s offer on generalised preferences, with all the perspectives it provokes, must be seen as the start of a more deliberate Community policy with regard to the entire Third World. It is in fact the concretisation of an essential element of this policy, which has now become urgent because of the prospects of economic and monetary union

⁵⁹ « c’est dans ce contexte que j’ai fait une déclaration au nom de la communauté pour faire état de notre satisfaction des résultats qui ont pu être obtenus en raison du profond sentiment de responsabilité qu’éprouve la communauté eu égard au fait qu’elle a été le promoteur de cette idée de préférences. j’ai insisté enfin sur le fait que la communauté ne souhaite pas que ces préférences généralisées puissent donner lieu à des divergences voire des oppositions entre les pays membres de la CEE et notamment entre les pays eux-mêmes. » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172, Cable from di Martino to the EEC regarding the 4th session of UNCTAD’s Special Preferences Committee, 20 April 1970.

⁶⁰ HAEC BDT 375/99, 30 septembre 1970, Européen Parlement, Commission des relations économiques extérieures, Document 116, Rapport intérimaire : Proposition de résolution sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des pays en voie de développement; HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172/3, 21 octobre 1970, Déclaration de M. V. di Martino faite au nom de la Communauté Économique Européenne à la 4^e session extraordinaire du Conseil du Commerce et du Développement.

(despite its ups and downs), the increased responsibilities which will fall to a Community in the process of enlargement, and the need to ensure the success of the Second Development Decade. This policy will be part of one of the deep-seated aims of the Community, namely the systematic search for a more harmonious distribution – and more adapted to our times – of the wealth of the entire universe. In this perspective, generalised preferences will be considered as a factor of peace in the world.⁶¹

The EEC scheme covered processed agricultural products under Chapters 1 to 24 of the Brussels Tariff Nomenclature (BTN) as well as finished and semi-finished manufactures under Chapters 25 to 99 of BTN. The intended ‘beneficiaries’ of the scheme were G77 countries (which were, in fact, 91 countries at the time), territories and dependent countries beyond the G77, and any other candidate countries outside these categories and the existing EEC association agreements with ex-colonies in Africa.⁶²

In simple terms, the policy distinguished between ‘non-sensitive’ and ‘sensitive’ products depending on the extent to which prospective imports competed with EEC-side goods. Generally, the Community slashed customs duties to zero on imports deemed non-sensitive and reduced the ‘normal’ tariffs under GATT rules on imports considered ‘sensitive’. The scheme also imposed import quotas and ceilings that, when breached, would trigger so-called ‘safeguard measures’ and reinstate most-favoured-nation tariffs to ‘protect’ producers in the Community and exporters from associated countries and other GSP targets (Gstöhl and De Bièvre 2018, 154–55).

⁶¹ « « La Communauté entend assumer son rôle avec responsabilité » a déclaré avec force à plusieurs reprises à la CNUCED le représentant de la Communauté, M. Vittorio di Martino. Cette responsabilité découle tout naturellement de la place sans cesse croissante qu’occupe la Communauté dans les échanges extérieurs des pays moins favorisés et également des engagements qu’elle a contractés avec un grand nombre de ces pays. Cette responsabilité comporte un effort d’imagination créatrice qui est, à bien des égards, audacieux tout en restant réaliste et équilibré.

[...]

En définitive, la mise en œuvre de l’offre de la Communauté en matière de préférences généralisées, avec toutes les perspectives qu’elle appelle, doit être considérée comme l’amorce d’une politique communautaire plus délibérée à l’égard de l’ensemble du tiers monde. Elle constitue en effet la concrétisation d’un élément essentiel de cette politique devenue désormais urgente en raison des perspectives de l’union économique et monétaire (malgré ses péripéties), des responsabilités accrues qui incomberont à une Communauté en voie d’élargissement et de la nécessité d’assurer le succès de la deuxième décennie du développement. Cette politique s’inscrit dans l’une des finalités profondes de la Communauté, à savoir la recherche systématique d’une répartition plus harmonieuse – et plus adaptée à notre temps – des richesses de l’ensemble de l’univers. Dans cette optique, les préférences généralisées seront considérées comme un facteur de paix dans le monde. » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, June 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

⁶² HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, June 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

In justifying its GSP policy internally, the Commission reiterated its responsibility not only to Third World countries at large but also to the EEC's own industries and its associated countries enjoying 'special preferences'. These passages reflect this thinking:

At first glance, the scheme of the Community seems very complex. As a result, it may even seem rigid in its application. This complexity and rigidity are more apparent than real. In reality, the scheme of the Community is reminiscent of a clockwork mechanism intended to maintain its regular functioning and above all to create a balance between a certain number of requirements and contingencies. The Community's offer has in fact been designed in such a way as to give the maximum possible advantages to the beneficiary countries while reasonably safeguarding the interests of the industries of the Community and its associated States.

Offering advantages adapted to the export needs and export capacities of developing countries, while taking care to avoid accentuating the gap between the most advanced and the least advanced among them: this is expected from a responsible attitude.

Offering advantages bearing tolerable costs for the industries of the Community and which are compatible with the commitments entered into vis-à-vis the associated states: this is expected from a realistic attitude.⁶³

Reinforcing the 'responsibility' discourse, EEC institutions repeatedly emphasised that the Community, unlike other industrialised economies, firmly promoted the notion of generalised preferences before, during, and after the inauguration of GSP 1971.⁶⁴ The Community prided itself in consistently championing this principle and in being the first major power to translate it into policy. Yet this sense of pride went beyond the context of generalised preferences and their

⁶³ « A première vue, le schéma de la Communauté semble très complexe. De ce fait, il paraît peut-être même rigide dans son application. Cette complexité et cette rigidité sont plus apparentes que réelles. En réalité, le schéma de la Communauté fait penser à un mécanisme d'horlogerie destiné à maintenir son fonctionnement régulier et surtout à créer un équilibre entre un certain nombre d'exigences et de contingences. L'offre de la Communauté a été conçue en effet de façon à donner le maximum d'avantages possible aux pays bénéficiaires tout en préservant raisonnablement les intérêts des industries de la Communauté et de ses États associés.

Offrir des avantages adaptés aux besoins d'exportation et aux capacités d'exportation des pays en voie de développement, tout en veillant à éviter d'accentuer l'écart entre les plus avancées et les moins avancées d'entre eux : c'est faire preuve d'une attitude responsable.

Offrir des avantages qui comportent des sacrifices supportables pour les industries de la Communauté et qui soient compatibles avec les engagements pris vis-à-vis des États associés : c'est preuve d'une attitude réaliste. » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, juin 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d'information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

⁶⁴ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172, 31 mars 1970, Déclaration faite au nom de la Communauté Économique Européenne par le Représentant de la Commission des Communautés Européennes à Genève, à la 4^{ème} session du Comité Spécial des Préférences (CNUCED); HAEC BDT 375/99, 30 septembre 1970, Européen Parlement, Commission des relations économiques extérieures, Document 116, Rapport intérimaire: Proposition de résolution sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des pays en voie de développement; HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, 27 February 1975, Council resolution on the future development of the Community's generalized tariff preferences, Note to Sir Christopher Soames – Vice President.

economic advantages for the Third World. The EEC Council regarded the GSP policy as ‘a new concrete manifestation of the spirit of solidarity which binds it to all countries less fortunate in the world’.⁶⁵ For a responsible Community, this manifestation drove home the twin importance of forging *interdependence* between South–North interests in the areas of development cooperation⁶⁶ and, at the same time, of enforcing a more equitable *sharing of burdens* caused by the GSP regime.⁶⁷

3.4.1 Interdependence and ‘ever greater liberalisation’

The Community doubly understood the implementation of non-reciprocal and differential preferences for manufactures as a policy contributing not only to the harmonious evolution of international trade but also to the ‘betterment of the lot of Third World peoples’.⁶⁸ GSP was, and continues to be, widely seen as a mainstay of the EU project’s overall policy of development cooperation⁶⁹ or international partnerships in today’s official discourse. The Commission maintained that generalised preferences and their integration in the Community’s common policies would ‘rearrange’ South–North trade relations by serving as a mechanism of development cooperation:

[GSP] forms part of the efforts to gradually rearrange, in a fairer way and more in keeping with contemporary reality, the economic relations between industrialised countries and developing countries. The European Community and its Member States have assumed an exemplary role. If, for certain countries, developed and less developed, generalised preferences are no more than

⁶⁵ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, Élément destiné à l’intervention du Président Malfatti sur les préférences généralisées, Conseil du 21 juin 1971 à Luxembourg.

⁶⁶ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, June 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

⁶⁷ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 375, 6 décembre 1976, DG RELEX / DG DEVE, Proposition de règlement du Conseil relatif à la création d’une agence Européenne pour la coopération commerciale avec les PVD.

⁶⁸ « l’amélioration du sort des peuples du tiers monde » HAEC BDT 375/99, 30 septembre 1970, Documents de séance, Document 116, Rapport intérimaires, Européen Parlement, Commission des relations économiques extérieures, Proposition de résolution sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des pays en voie de développement.

⁶⁹ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, Council resolution on the Future Development of the European Community’s Generalised Tariff Preferences; HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 331, 23 octobre 1974, Comité économique et social, Dossier 104/EXT, Project d’avis de la section des relations extérieures sur le document COM(74) 950 final; HAEC BAC 97/1986 No. 45, Regulation (EEC) No. 3010/75 of the Council of 17 November 1975 opening preferential tariffs for certain products originating in developing countries; HAEC BAC 97/1986 No. 17, 23 March 1977, Draft: Outline of the statement to be made by Mr Haferkamp at the next EEC-Yugoslavia Joint Committee Meeting.

simple commercial policy measures, the Community has always considered them to be an instrument of development cooperation.⁷⁰

This reading stresses not only the responsibility of the Western European *self* but also that of *others* in inaugurating a ‘new’ conception of the ‘international’. The Commission underlined the *interdependence* of the interests and obligations of the Community as well as GSP donor and target countries with respect to their *co-responsibility* in the application of concerted measures in favour of development.⁷¹

In this sense, the non-reciprocal character of GSP attracted criticisms from the European Economic and Social Committee, a consultative and advisory body composed of European ‘social partners’, including employers’ organisations, trade unions, and representatives of different industry interest groups. Three years after GSP 1971, the Committee argued that the EEC:

must also question the advisability of maintaining the unilateral nature of generalised tariff preferences. Wouldn’t it be appropriate from now on to consider the developing countries as true partners with which aid should lose its granted nature and become negotiated aid based on mutual commitments and respect for a certain number of economic, commercial, and social rules?⁷²

In this view, the Community would not be treating the Third World as ‘true partners’ unless it revoked the unilateral character of GSP and demanded ‘mutual commitments’ on not only trade-related but also social rules. Interestingly, this early ‘social’ criticism of GSP foreshadows the EU’s self-styled normative trade agenda today in terms of attaching political conditionalities to

⁷⁰ « L’établissement des préférences généralisées s’insère dans les efforts tenant réaménager progressivement, dans un sens plus équitable et plus conforme à la réalité contemporaine, les rapports économiques entre pays industrialisés et pays en voie de développement. La Communauté Européenne et ses États membres y ont assumé un rôle exemplaire. Si, pour certains pays, développés et moins développés, les préférences généralisées ne sont que de simples mesures de politique commerciale, la Communauté a toujours considéré pour sa part qu’il s’agit d’un instrument de coopération au développement. » HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 331, Commission of the European Community, 20 December 1974, Orientation pour le développement futur des préférences tarifaires généralisées de la Communauté (projet).

⁷¹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, juin 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

⁷² « On doit en outre s’interroger sur l’opportunité de maintenir le caractère unilatéral des préférences tarifaires généralisées. Ne conviendrait-il pas de considérer désormais les pays en voie de développement comme de véritables partenaires vis-à-vis desquels l’aide devrait perdre son caractère octroyé pour devenir une aide négociée reposant sur des engagements mutuels et le respect d’un certain nombre de règles économiques, commerciales et sociales ? » HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 33, European Economic and Social Committee, 23 October 1974, Project d’avis de la section des relations extérieures sur le document, COM(74) 950 final, Dossier 104/EXT.

market access and opening the door to more interventionist logics concerning the global souths—both of which are normalised as ‘partnerships’ by virtue of GSP.

As far as the Commission was concerned, development cooperation where partner countries would reap benefits implied both rights and obligations. While maintaining that GSP should retain its legally autonomous nature to respect the principle of non-reciprocity in preferences, the Commission, however, reasoned that GSP:

must be able to fit into a concerted policy with the beneficiaries allowing them to use the preferences in compliance with a certain number of economic, commercial, and social rules. [...] Without going so far, it is advisable to impress upon the beneficiary countries that they take part in cooperation, not only through the observation of a code of good conduct on the use of preferential advantages but also through the expression of a minimum understanding, openness, and solidarity with the Community.⁷³

This notion of interdependence, however, created tensions among Third World countries and EEC member states. In a joint statement, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka stressed the ‘unilateral’ character of GSP. However, they argued that ‘it is also a part of the process of international cooperation for development. It is, therefore, not enough for the Community to decide of its own accord what is good for us; our own views must also be fully taken into consideration’.⁷⁴

At the Council level, there was an internal cleavage between member states regarding the future role of GSP in development cooperation post-1975. Two extreme positions emerged. On the one hand, the Netherlands, backed by Britain, advocated that the Community should make stronger commitments to helping the poorest GSP targets by escalating two-fold the GSP imports of processed agricultural products into the Common Market. On the other hand, Italy insisted that the EEC ‘should be very careful in entering into engagements or making promises’. For the Italian

⁷³ « Elles doivent cependant pouvoir s’insérer dans une politique concertée avec les bénéficiaires permettant à ces derniers de les utiliser dans le respect d’un certain nombre de règles économiques, commerciales et sociales. [...] Sans aller jusque là il convient d’obtenir des pays bénéficiaires qu’ils participent à la coopération non réciproque - à que par l’application d’un code de bonne conduite sur l’utilisation des avantages préférentiels et par la manifestation d’un minimum de compréhension, d’ouverture et de solidarité à l’égard de la Communauté. » HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 331, EEC Commission, 20 décembre 1974, Orientation pour le développement futur des préférences tarifaires généralisées de la Communauté (projet).

⁷⁴ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, 5 December 1974, Joint statement by the representatives of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka: Information meeting with the Commission.

delegation, further improvements on preferences for agricultural products were non-negotiable due to the sentiment that ‘too many Mediterranean concessions in this field are at Italy’s expenses’. France and Ireland echoed the Italian view. Agreeing to disagree, the Council acknowledged the necessity to conclude with a ‘positive’ resolution for external reasons apropos of ongoing political discussions in South–North economic relations, i.e., the establishment of NIEO.⁷⁵

Regarding the Dutch reluctance to accept the notion of interdependence that would imply reciprocity and commitments on both sides, the Commission contended that such was ‘not a nuanced interpretation’ and emphasised a two-pronged rebuttal affirming GSP’s role towards ‘ever greater liberalisation’:

First and foremost, ‘increasing economic interdependence’ is an obvious phenomenon and it largely conditions the improvements of the GSP. On many occasions, the beneficiary countries themselves (in declarations to UNCTAD and in particular to the Special Committee of Preferences by Ambassador Asante of Ghana, Ambassador Patarajah of Sri Lanka, Ambassador Brillantes of the Philippines, and the representative of India) have recognized that the developing economies of the Third World depend crucially on the economic prosperity of the preference-giving countries. Secondly, the proper administration of generalised preferences presupposes an expansion of international trade governed by disciplines and obligations conducive to ensuring ever greater liberalisation. In other words, it is in no way a question of obtaining from the beneficiary countries new obligations under the generalised tariff preferences and any reciprocity whatsoever.⁷⁶

In legitimising the need to offer preferential market access, the Community as a ‘responsible’ global actor articulated a discourse around fostering interdependence with the Third World. In this sense, it reflected Third World discourses by considering GSP as part of wider efforts to ‘rearrange’ South–North trade relations. The EEC at the same time entrenched GSP as a tool of

⁷⁵ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, 27 February 1975, M. Gaspari, Note to Sir Christopher Soames – Vice-President, Our communication about the future development of the EEC – GSP – council meeting on 3 and 4 March 1975.

⁷⁶ « Tout d’abord, l’interdépendance économique croissante est un phénomène d’évidence et elle conditionne largement les améliorations du SPG. A maintes reprises, les pays bénéficiaires eux-mêmes (déclarations à la CNUCED et notamment au Comité spécial des Préférences : Ambassadeur ASANTE de Ghana, Ambassadeur PATARAJAH du Sri Lanka, Ambassadeur BRILLANTES des Philippines, et le représentant de l’Inde) ont reconnu que le développement économique du Tiers-Monde dépend très largement de la prospérité économique des pays donateurs de préférences. Ensuite, le bon fonctionnement des préférences généralisées suppose une expansion du commerce international régi par des disciplines et des obligations tendant à en assurer une libéralisation sans cesse plus grande. Par conséquent, il ne s’agit nullement d’obtenir des pays bénéficiaires de nouvelles obligations au titre des préférences tarifaires généralisées et à plus forte raison une réciprocité quelconque » HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, M. Gaspari’s note to Sir Christopher Soames, Commission Vice-President, 27 February 1975, Our communication about the future development of the EEC GSP – Council meeting on 3 and 4 March 1975.

development cooperation as opposed to merely looking at it as a policy intended to stimulate commerce.

3.4.2 Burden-sharing for the Third World

Closely linked to the idea of an interdependent international trading order based on preferences was the contentious notion of ‘burden-sharing’ between the EEC and other industrialised powers. Within UNCTAD discussions, this concept ‘related to the liabilities for industries in importing countries arising from increased opportunities for imports from developing countries and for export industries of the developed third countries arising from new relative disadvantages in other developed markets’.⁷⁷ From the point of view of the EEC, the granting of preferences would immediately entail a ‘budgetary sacrifice’ in the form of the non-collection of customs duties and a risk of economic disturbances, particularly for the least competitive industries in the destination markets.⁷⁸ France even went as far as equating such foregone revenues to ‘subsidised’ imports:

For psychological, political, and technical reasons, an industrialised country cannot, in fact, subsidise its industrial imports from developing countries except through a loss of revenue for the State as such. [...] Indeed, the exemption of an import duty is equivalent, from a commercial point of view, to an export subsidy of equal value, with the difference that the ‘subsidy’ is not borne by the exporting country, but by the importing country. The wealth of the highly industrialised countries is such that the loss of earnings thus suffered by their respective States would be borne without inconvenience.⁷⁹

That said, Third World countries were worried that too much emphasis on the burden-sharing principle in UNCTAD negotiations would torpedo the implementation of generalised preferences

⁷⁷ UNCTAD 1968: 265, Annex VII – B. Report of the Second Committee.

⁷⁸ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, June 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

⁷⁹ « Pour des raisons tant psychologiques et politiques que techniques, un pays industrialisé ne saurait subventionner en fait ses importations industrielles en provenance de pays en voie de développement que par un manque à gagner de l’Etat en tant que tel. [...] En effet, l’exonération d’un droit à l’importation équivaut, du point de vue commercial, à une subvention à l’exportation d’égale valeur, à cette différence près que la « subvention » est à la charge non pas du pays exportateur, mais du pays importateur. La richesse des pays hautement industrialisés est telle que le manque à gagner ainsi subi par leurs États respectifs serait supporté sans inconvénients. » HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, French government’s aide-mémoire on certain issues on the agenda of UNCTAD, 28 April 1965.

and effectively stifle the entire export-stimulating purpose of such preferences. For their part, industrialised countries stated that these concerns were ‘exaggerated’.⁸⁰

Still, the question of burden-sharing had been a long-standing point of contention within OECD deliberations as to harmonising the autonomous GSP regimes of preference-giving countries with the particular objective of achieving an equitable distribution of burdens between industrialised powers. What complicated matters more was the abolition of ‘reverse’ preferences that EEC member states enjoyed under association agreements, especially with France’s and Belgium’s ex-colonies. Japan, the Nordic states, Switzerland, and the US considered the end of reverse preferences as a key element in granting generalised preferences within UNCTAD. In terms of burden-sharing, abolishing EEC reverse preferences would afford trading advantages to these industrialised countries. On the question of beneficiaries, the Commission pointed out that burden-sharing might be considerably complicated by the fact that the US and Japan intended to exclude a fairly large number of target countries. The Commission drew attention to the repercussions that such an attitude could have on the ‘fair’ distribution of burdens from a geographical point of view.⁸¹

The EEC and the US ironed out their differences at the last session of the Ministerial Council of the OECD, which convened from 20 to 22 May 1970 in Paris, in order to examine the results of UNCTAD negotiations and to address the question of fairly distributing the burdens that would have to be borne by industrialised countries in the application of generalised preferences. OECD countries found a partial compromise on the terms and conditions for the entry into force of generalised preferences, on the basis of a proposal drawn up by the organisation’s secretary-general, Mr Van Lennep. In addition, representatives of OECD countries held a series of restricted consultations over the preceding months, largely taking onboard suggestions already presented by the EEC. According to the agreement reached in Paris, the various systems of preferences being

⁸⁰ Annex VII – B. Report of the Second Committee, Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, SECOND SESSION, New Delhi, 1 February - 29 March 1968, Volume I, Report and Annexes, TD/97, Vol. I, p. 265.

⁸¹ HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, 27 March 1969, EEC Commission, SEC(69) 1281, Octroi de préférences tarifaires généralisées pour les exportations de produits manufactures et semi-manufactures des pays en voie de développement; HAEC BAC 134/1987 No. 145/2, n.d., Commonwealth and Generalised Preferences; HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172/3, 30 July 1970, EEC Council, Groupe de travail des questions commerciales (Affaires CNUCED – Préférences généralisées), Annotations à l’ordre du jour provisoire.

proposed at the time would be implemented for a limited period, on a trial basis. In doing so, industrialised countries could undertake to apply their schemes in ‘the most liberal spirit possible’. Furthermore, they could also declare their readiness to examine, in future, the possibilities of improving and harmonising their systems. This compromise worked mainly because the US abandoned its preconditions on the need for a uniform system of preferences and the abolition of reverse preferences.⁸²

After its GSP 1971 scheme came into force, the Community continued to have difficulties with the US, the last major industrial power to run its own scheme in 1976. The EEC consistently insisted on different occasions that its Global North partners ought to apply their own generalised preferences as quickly as possible in order to promote a fairer sharing of responsibilities and burdens between industrial powers.⁸³ For example, the Committee on Development and Cooperation at the European Parliament rearticulated the image of the EEC as a ‘responsible’ GSP donor unlike ‘important industrialized countries [that] still appear to be unable to accept their responsibilities in this respect towards the developing countries, to the detriment not only of the developing countries but also of those industrialized countries which do grant preferences’.⁸⁴ For the Commission, the Community could not continue disproportionately carrying the burdens of GSP unless the costs were reasonably partitioned between donors within a harmonised system.⁸⁵ In a speech addressing the European Parliament in 1974, Sir Christopher Soames, British Conservative politician and European Commissioner for External Relations, stressed that the Commission:

emphasises the desirability of all industrialised countries sharing in the costs of such schemes of generalised preference. I wholeheartedly share that view. I have said so in my speeches, including

⁸² HAEC BDT 375/99, 30 septembre 1970, Européen Parlement, Commission des relations économiques extérieures, Rapport intérimaire, Document 116, Sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des pays en voie de développement, Rapporteur: M. Westerterp.

⁸³ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 331, 23 octobre 1974, Comité Économique et Social, Project d’avis de la section des relations extérieures sur doc. COM(74) 950 final.

⁸⁴ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 3798, July 1974, European Parliament, Committee on Development and Cooperation, Working Document 172/74, Report on the proposal from the Commission of the European Communities to the Council (Doc. 104/74) for a regulation to extend the list of products falling within Chapters 1 to 24 of the Common Customs Tariff, in respect of which the scheme of generalized preferences in favour of developing countries is applicable under Regulation (EEC) No. 3506/73 of the Council of 18 December 1973.

⁸⁵ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, 1975, The Future Development of the European Community’s Generalised Tariff Preferences.

speeches in the United States. It is encouraging that this year one more industrialised country, Canada, has been added to the list of those that grant preferences. But the United States is still not a donor. There are many reasons why the Commission attaches the greatest importance to the early enactment of the [US] Trade Bill. Not the least of them is that we hope that the United States will then be able to introduce its own scheme, for this in turn cannot but facilitate the achievement by the Community of the objective it has set itself of maintaining a steady rise in the value and importance of our scheme. When the United States comes in, the burden of the scheme will be spread more equitably throughout the industrialised world.⁸⁶

At home, the EEC similarly struggled to deal with concerns about shielding particular European groups from injurious economic effects, whether substantiated or alleged, thanks to GSP-induced competition. Reform cycle after reform cycle, efforts to renovate the GSP policy within the first decade exploited these tensions as discursive anchors to navigate and justify the degree of openness of the scheme.

Within an enlarged Community, Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands preferred to offer an expanded list of mainly agricultural products, larger overall volumes, and higher total value under GSP 1975. Having in mind the rift with the US over international burden-sharing, the Commission opined that ‘it seems difficult for the Community to introduce yet further improvements into its scheme, going beyond its UNCTAD commitments in particular, so long as the other major economic powers have not made a comparable effort or even, in some cases, have not implemented general preferences at all’.⁸⁷ In Brussels, ‘resentment’ ran high apropos of Washington’s foot-dragging on UNCTAD demands. ‘It has been over ten years since New Delhi. Where has the United States been?’, one expert rhetorically asked in a press report.⁸⁸ The Committee on Development and Cooperation at the European Parliament, however, castigated this line of thinking and drew attention to the burdens borne internally in the Community:

The Commission apologises, as it were, for its modest proposals by recalling, first of all, that the application of generalized preferences at world level should be based on the principle of burden-

⁸⁶ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, Speech by Sir Christopher Soames, Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities, at a meeting by the Committee on Development and Cooperation at the European Parliament, October 1974.

⁸⁷ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, 10 April 1974, G J L Avery, Explanatory Memorandum, Draft regulation to extend the list of products falling within Chapters 1 to 24 of the Common Customs Tariff, in respect of which the scheme of generalized preferences in favour of developing countries is applicable under Regulation (EEC) No. 3506/73 of the Council of 18 December 1973.

⁸⁸ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, Douglas Ramsey, ‘Europe to Cut Tariffs for Third World’, 24 June 1974, The Washington Post.

sharing between donor countries. Your committee does not believe that this should be a basic consideration in the Community's policy. It would start by pointing out that the generalized tariff preferences are granted independently. It would also draw attention to the fact that in the past year, as a result of the rise in prices of certain raw materials in particular and of the bad economic situation in general, the position of the developing countries has deteriorated considerably. By comparison the situation in the Community is still rosy. Your committee therefore believes that the criteria for granting tariff preferences should not be so much whether other major industrialized countries, such as, for example, the United States and Canada also participate. [...] The Community should base its policy on the reasonable needs of developing countries and the actual capacity of the Community to grant preferences. [...] Your committee ardently hopes that the Commission will soon be in a position to present a constructive proposal with the aim of furthering structural changes in the Community to ensure that a Community development cooperation policy is no longer impeded by inequitable distribution of the burden within the Community.⁸⁹

GSP 1977 discussions framed the Community's original scheme in 1971 as a response to a political challenge at a time of expansion and prosperity that in turn facilitated the sacrifices on the part of EEC. Six years later, the Commission considered GSP as an economic challenge at a time of instability and recession, which worsened year-on-year yet had 'in no way undermined the desire for solidarity shown by the Community with regard to the developing countries through the GSP'. Despite the economic difficulties faced by the Community, the Commission maintained that they could not be comparable with those experienced by the Third World, in particular the 'least developed'. With the promise of economic recovery in the wake of the energy crisis at the time, the Commission made assurances that the toll of GSP 1977 would be deemed 'bearable for the Community economy, that they constitute an act of responsibility towards the developing countries as well as a refusal of the easy temptations of a return to any form of protection'.⁹⁰

3.5 Conclusion

Writing in the early seventies on the Community as a 'superpower in the making', Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung observed: 'Images of a *pax bruxellana*, a world order with its center in Brussels but also based on law and order according to well-known European recipes, are already

⁸⁹ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, Report on the proposal from the Commission of the European Communities to the Council Doc. 104/74, Committee on Development and Cooperation, European Parliament, Document 172/74.

⁹⁰ HAEC BAC 97/1986 No. 45, Le schéma 1977 des préférences tarifaires généralisées de la communauté Européenne (Propositions et communications de la Commission au Conseil).

rapidly becoming part of Western European belief systems' (Galtung 1973, 117–18). Arguably, generalised preferences have, since then, been inscribed into this Eurocentric world order.

The EU's historical archives bring to light that, in this world order, the Community's discourse of interdependence reflected its deep sense of responsibility for being the first major industrialised power to institute a GSP regime in line with long-standing demands by newly independent ex-colonies and dependent territories. Not only did the Community act in a responsible manner in terms of disproportionately carrying the 'burden' of offering trade concessions to much of the Third World but also towards its African associates and its own industries at home. *Pax bruxellana* found expression in GSP; the Community used GSP as a discursive marker of its more prominent global role in pursuit of development cooperation not only with Western Europe's ex-colonies in Africa but also more broadly with the Third World.

However, despite being borne out of geopolitically situated sites of struggles in the Third World, G77's advocacy fell short of realising a truly *generalised* system of preferences. The Brasseur plan, preferred by Belgium and France, hijacked this vision. It trumped the principle of opening rich world markets to *all* manufactures from *all* Third World countries and dependent territories. At the same time, it bypassed the strong opposition of the US to generalised preferences, which represented a stark departure from the most-favoured-nation principle—the prized norm of mutual trade liberalisation within the post-war liberal world trading order.

As a 'half-way house' between these two diametrically opposed views, the Brasseur plan effectively enabled the Community to define the institution of generalised preferences *on its own terms*. In essence, the scheme of preferences that the Community inaugurated in 1971 was neither as generalised nor as generous as G77 might have hoped it would be. It was a selective, time-bound and degressive scheme that discriminated between which manufactured goods could and could not be treated preferentially from eligible countries under certain import thresholds. For the EEC, the spirit of the Brasseur plan aligned with the advocacy of G77 to diversify their export baskets, but without causing unwanted disruptions to global markets, especially the Community's internal markets.

In this light, the Community's interdependence discourse underpinned its sense of responsibility towards UNCTAD and towards the Third World. In the wake of decolonisation and the wider contexts of the first two 'development decades', the EEC regarded its regime of generalised preferences as a concrete way of fostering mutually beneficial economic cooperation within South–North relations. Although generalised preferences were only one of the many structural reforms called for by the Third World, discourses by the EEC and the Third World both considered GSP as a crucial pillar of reconstructing a 'new' order of international economic relations. From a Third World perspective, generalised preferences promised a break with economic imperialism and dependency on the metropolitan core. From an EEC perspective, GSP broadened Western Europe's horizons as a global trade and development actor that sacrificed customs earnings and carried the costs of opening its markets to exporters from the Third World. For some time, the Community argued that promoting interdependence via GSP burdened the EEC because the US refused to follow suit, until 1976. This language of burden-sharing persisted also in the context of the oil crisis in the seventies. By maintaining the generosity of GSP despite economic difficulties at the time, the Community rearticulated its discourse of responsibly sustaining interdependent trade relations with the Third World.

In sum, this chapter has re-historicised GSP by contextualising the EEC's discourse about preferential trade relations with the Third World amidst the latter's demands for a different way of organising global economic relations in the wake of decolonisation. In doing so, it challenges ahistorical and apolitical views of GSP as a policy historically detached from colonial relations. While the official discourse of interdependence built on responsible and cooperative trade partnerships articulated by the EEC aligned with those of the Third World, the ways in which the Community organised its GSP policy in practice perpetuated colonial/modern logics of hierarchical economic relations not only between itself and the Third World, but also between Third World 'beneficiaries' themselves. Shattering the official image of interdependence in the sixties and seventies, GSP served, as I argue in the next chapter, a particular site of reifying familiar hierarchies and dependent trade relations in world politics.

4. 'Not a gift for the Third World': Hierarchies in the global economic order and a critical interpretation of the European Economic Community's GSP policy in the 1970s

4.1 Introduction

Amidst Third World demands for a different global economic order in the sixties and seventies, the European Economic Community (EEC), as a responsible global actor, articulated an official discourse of fostering interdependent trade relations with G77 countries, ex-colonies and dependent territories. In this view, the Community carried the burdens of offering generalised preferences to the rest of the Third World beyond its hitherto Africa-focused trade and development policy.

Challenging this interdependence discourse, early contributions by critical scholars, as discussed in the previous chapter, have cautioned that generalised preferences would be nothing more than an extension of colonialism, that is to say as an instrument of neocolonialism. More to the point, they argued that GSP would perpetuate unequal exchange between the Western European cores and the Third World peripheries. Dependency, not interdependence, was still the game in town. This interpretation shatters the official image of GSP as a solidaristic act of righting past colonial injustices. Proponents of the dependency view, however, launched their critique in theoretical terms and often in parsimonious ways. Early writings could not, unfortunately, draw on primary documents that were not publicly available then. Now we have the benefit of digging up the past of GSP in the EU's historical archives.

Building on the earlier critique of *dependencia* scholars who argued that GSP extended colonial relations, this chapter generates an alternative interpretation to contradict the EEC's discourse of interdependence not so much couched in neocolonialism, but rather in coloniality. To reiterate, it would be a gross simplification to couch GSP *in toto* in neocolonial terms because the EEC as a supranational political creature obviously did not formally colonise *all* of its GSP targets. Rather, this chapter demonstrates empirically how the Community entrenched the Third World as subordinate and dependent entities through colonial/modern logics of sustaining hierarchical

economic relations. To this end, I argue that GSP engendered hierarchies as the EEC eventually translated preferential market access for Third World countries into policy. Not only did the Community differentiate between itself and others but also between its presumed others themselves. Through the GSP policy, the Community reproduced hierarchical relations of power within a historical milieu supposedly characterised by ‘solidaristic ties’ and ‘international cooperation’. As a methodological and epistemological choice, this reinterpretation is imperative in clearing the ground for any critical interpretation of the EU GSP regime today. Although all researchers engage in ‘interpreting’ the social and political world in one way or another, I claim that, as an interpretive researcher, I am ‘constructing “an” interpretation, one that I found better, more complete, and more coherent, but that was also inevitably shaped by the available knowledge and mode of inquiry of my own historical time’ (Lynch 2006, 295).

To this end, I propel three arguments to show how GSP undergirded colonial/modern logics of subordinating the Third World within an asymmetrical global economic order. First, deciding what constituted ‘developing’ countries proved to be a highly politicised and parochial exercise of regulating who could and could not claim entitlements to the GSP regime, which in the process crystallised the category of ‘developing’ countries and those deemed outside this category. For the EEC, such an exercise formalised hierarchical categories in its external trade relations with the Third World. Second, the EEC fractured the Third World by differentiating between ‘companions in misery’,⁹¹ that is, African countries with association agreements in place with Brussels and G77 countries without such agreements. Last but not least, GSP regurgitated colonial/modern logics as the UK set out to reshape the enlarged Community’s GSP policy in defence of preserving colonial patterns of trade with Asian Commonwealth countries and Hong Kong as a dependent territory.

4.2 On making ‘developing’ countries

Defining what constituted the Third World and, as such, the supposed ‘developing’ country targets of generalised preferences posed considerable difficulties for the Community (Holland 2002). Early on and throughout different iterations to revamp the GSP policy in the seventies, this

⁹¹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1941, Commission de la CEE, Note d’information, juin 1971. La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des PVD.

undertaking pried open ‘a politically extremely difficult and delicate question of how the benefits of the scheme should be shared between its beneficiaries’.⁹²

With a view to inaugurating its GSP regime in 1971, the EEC Six dealt with the question of which countries should benefit from the Community’s scheme. Given the lack of clearly defined categories of which countries counted as ‘developing’ at the time and despite its earlier endorsement of the UNCTAD principle of ‘self-election’ by countries wishing to be considered as GSP targets, the Community in effect equated and restricted its understanding of ‘developing’ countries mainly to the 91 countries and territories making up the G77.⁹³ While they generally agreed on the inclusion of G77 countries, EEC member states differed as to the status of associated states in Africa and the Mediterranean, Eastern Bloc countries, and dependent countries and territories.

As for the creation of a ‘special regime’ for dependent countries and territories of third states (particularly Cuba and Formosa), Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands all supported this idea. Germany and Italy objected to the inclusion of Hong Kong and Macao, while Luxembourg wanted to exclude Hong Kong.⁹⁴ Given the international legal status of Taiwan, the Commission suggested, subject to the Council’s prerogatives, that ‘the only solution not only to avoid prejudice against Taiwan but to concede justified advantages because of its nature as a developing territory is to grant it the benefit of generalised preferences’.⁹⁵ The Community also received an official request from New Zealand ‘acting in the interests of Western Samoa’. While the Polynesian island country had already ceased to be its trust territory, New Zealand invoked the principle of ‘self-election’ and lobbied for its past dependent territory’s inclusion in GSP, stating ‘it is Western Samoa’s view that it does indeed have developing status according to the generally

⁹² HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, 1974, Speaking notes for Mr Cheysson on the Nielsen Report.

⁹³ HAEC BAC 28/1980 No. 429, 15 octobre 1972, Note a l’attention de Monsieur Dahrendorf, DG RELEX, Problème de Taiwan dans le cadre des préférences généralisées; HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 327, 10 January 1980, Draft letter by Roy DENMAN, DG RELEX Director-General, on the European Community’s GSP for 1980 to Mr N. Simon, Secretary General, Comité Permanent des Industries du Verre de la communauté européenne.

⁹⁴ HAEC BAC3/1978 No. 473, Commission des Communautés Européennes, Secrétariat général, 6 novembre 1970, RESTREINT : NOTE POUR MM. LES MEMBRES DE LA COMMISSION, SEC (70) 3988.

⁹⁵ « La seule solution permettant non seulement d’éviter un préjudice à Taiwan mais de lui accorder des avantages justifiés du fait de sa nature de territoire en voie de développement est de lui accorder le bénéfice des préférences généralisées. » HAEC BAC 28/1980 No. 429, 15 octobre 1972, Note a l’attention de Monsieur Dahrendorf, DG Relex, Problème de Taiwan dans le cadre des préférences généralisées.

agreed meaning of the term. Moreover, it is probable that it would qualify for the status of “least developed of the developing countries”⁹⁶ Aside from the question of including dependent territories and countries of third states, the Community also discussed the ‘desirability’ of including in GSP dependent territories and countries of EEC member states themselves. In particular, the Council agreed ‘to extend, under certain conditions, the generalised preferences to countries and territories dependent on third countries, provided that similar treatment is granted by other donor countries to these countries and territories and necessarily to the countries and territories belonging to the member states of the Community’.⁹⁷ In this sense, the Dutch delegation proposed that Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles be also added as eligible GSP targets.

The extension of GSP to the Mediterranean group of Spain, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Malta having ‘special relations’ with the Community polarised the member states. On the one hand, Germany favoured the inclusion of Mediterranean countries because they had a ‘status’ allowing their treatment as GSP targets and given that South American countries deemed more ‘developed’ than these countries were included in the scheme. The German delegation furthermore argued that the ‘generous gesture’ of inclusion would cost little to the Community and that other OECD states would exclude the Mediterranean countries from their schemes if the Community did so. For Germany, setting up carefully calibrated ‘butoirs’ or safeguard measures would assuage inconveniences for G77 countries. On the other hand, other member states initially had reservations on the inclusion of the Mediterranean group for various reasons. The Netherlands negated the Mediterranean question because they were not in a position to accept their ‘double participation’ in a future system of generalised preferences and in association agreements with the EEC, and given that a decision had not yet been taken within the framework of the OECD concerning the treatment of these countries under generalised preferences. Belgium, Italy, and Luxembourg more or less objected tentatively until a general orientation would emerge at the

⁹⁶ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, 23 August 1971, Note verbale from the New Zealand Mission to EEC on the inclusion of Western Samoa in the list of GSP beneficiaries.

⁹⁷ « d’étendre, sous certaines conditions, les préférences généralisées eux pays et territoires dépendants de pays tiers sous réserve qu’un traitement analogue soit accordé par les autres pays donateurs à ces pays et territoires et nécessairement aux pays et territoires relevant des États membres de la Communauté » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 473, Conseil, 27 mai 1971, S/501/71 (COMER 127), NOTE, Préférences généralisées en faveur des pays en voie de développement.

OECD level, although the Italian delegation specifically objected to the inclusion of Israel whose ‘high degree of industrial development precludes its inclusion’.⁹⁸

At least two Mediterranean countries fought for preferential treatment under the Community’s GSP policy. Within OECD, Spain struggled to gain recognition as a country with an ‘intermediate degree of development’. Autonomously categorising Spain as a ‘developing country’, Madrid yearned to garner nonreciprocal preferences for enhanced market access to the EEC. Spain argued that its ‘strategic emplacement between the developed bloc and the developing economies provided the country “a historical opportunity for [world] leadership”, that of leading a club made of Brazil, Chile, India, Mexico, Yugoslavia, and the United Arab Republic’ (Guirao 2021, 322). In the end, however, France vetoed the inclusion of Spain as a GSP beneficiary despite the support of the remaining EEC member states. Paris argued that the EEC ought to deal with the individual circumstances of Mediterranean countries through special arrangements (see Guirao 2021, ch. 7). Noting its exclusion from the EEC’s GSP 1971, Malta urged the Community to reconsider its decision, citing that Maltese industries remained in ‘an early phase of development’ and recalling that OECD countries had agreed to the self-election principle ‘to surmount the conceptual difficulties in arriving at an acceptable definition of a “developing country”’. While claiming it did not object to sharing GSP benefits with other ‘developing’ countries in the ‘privileged’ markets of EEC, Malta maintained that its exclusion from generalised preferences ‘would be a great hardship and could seem to neutralise in part some of the advantages negotiated by Malta under her Association Agreement with the Community’.⁹⁹

As for the Eastern Bloc, the Community, in general, agreed to exclude Bulgaria and Romania. Supported by the Dutch, Belgium believed that Bulgaria and Romania should be excluded from GSP because they were part of another economic system and given that they distanced themselves from G77 within the framework of UNCTAD. For Germany, it was ‘necessary’ to exclude Eastern Bloc countries, which the German delegation did not recognise as ‘developing’ countries. Germany argued that the gist of GSP was ‘incompatible’ with command economies and that

⁹⁸ HAEC BAC3/1978 No. 473, Commission des Communautés Européennes, Secrétariat général, 6 novembre 1970, RESTREINT : NOTE POUR MM. LES MEMBRES DE LA COMMISSION, SEC (70) 3988.

⁹⁹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, 27 May 1971, Letter from Maltese Ambassador G.T. Gurmi to the Director General for External Relations of EEC.

Eastern European countries were already competitive in terms of manufacturing many industrial goods. The Federal Republic also reasoned that they no longer granted capital aid to Bulgaria and Romania, which, viewed from Bonn, were not considered ‘developing’ countries. In the same vein, the European Economic and Social Committee cast doubts on the GSP prospects for Romania and Bulgaria. The Committee expressed concerns whether it was ‘economically appropriate’ to extend generalised preferences to the state-trading countries of Eastern Europe, which were in the business of taxing their exports of raw materials or providing subsidies deemed ‘unhealthy’ for exports.¹⁰⁰

Italy and the Netherlands opposed the inclusion of Morocco and Tunisia, which already had been granted EEC preferences as associated African states yet were at the same time founding members of the G77 within UNCTAD. This issue was especially salient for the Netherlands. Invoking the principle of identical treatment towards all EEC associated countries, the Dutch delegation argued that Morocco and Tunisia should be excluded from generalised preferences. Otherwise, the Netherlands feared that these countries would enjoy a ‘double advantage’, on the one hand, under the association agreements, and on the other, under the generalised system of preferences.¹⁰¹ This represented a less radical position for the Netherlands, which had earlier considered that generalised preferences should fully replace the partial systems of preferences currently applied, especially those granted by the EEC to African and Malagasy States. For Amsterdam, this approach would have had the advantage of establishing a single system of preferences operated under international control and of avoiding any discrimination between Third World countries. The Dutch delegation further noted that such a formula would have had the merit of responding better to the views expressed by G77 countries.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 331, European Economic and Social Committee, Dossier : 104/EXT, 23 octobre 1974, *Projet d’avis sur le doc. COM(74)950 final, Section des relations extérieures.*

¹⁰¹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 473, *Objet : 575ème réunion du Comité des représentants permanents - 5.11.70 - Préférences généralisées en faveur des pays en voie de développement (Doc. S/924/70 (com 212)), 6 novembre 1970, restreint, Commission des Communautés Européennes, SEC (70) 3988, Note pour les membres de la Commission.*

¹⁰² HAEC BDT6/73 271 No. 382, CEE Le Conseil, 4 May 1965, R/471/65 (COMER 65), *Note d’information, Examen des problèmes concernant la prochaine réunion du Comité spécial des préférences de l’UNCTAD (New York, 10 au 28 mai 1965).*

At the time of negotiating generalised preferences, the world did not have well-defined categories of ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries, as we do now based on World Bank and United Nations empirical indicators. This meant that the Community enjoyed considerable arbitrary leeway in deciding who could qualify to gain preferential access to its markets or not, despite the principle of self-election. At the heart of this political exercise was the need to differentiate between countries and their levels of development according to the EEC Six. A certain semblance of order had to be created before GSP could become a reality. This political exercise of worldmaking fell on the shoulders of rich OECD countries, including the EEC Six, which sat atop the hierarchy and had the power to categorise who counted as ‘developing’ in the context of preferential market access. Without question, G77 as well as dependent countries and territories were relegated to the bottom of this order as the main targets of GSP. Despite being politically part of the Third World, African and Malagasy states could not technically fit the GSP category because of their associated agreements with the Community, thus placing them more preferentially than G77. And finally in the grey zone between Western Europe and the Third World were Mediterranean and Eastern European countries which the EEC deemed to be too ‘developed’ but not ‘developing’ enough to be subsumed under the GSP label (even though Spain and Malta self-elected as ‘developing’) or too ‘developing’ but not ‘developed’ enough to be in a position to offer trade preferences themselves. In other words, the logic of GSP reinforced the ‘Three Worlds’ hierarchical order at the time and arguably latched the Cold War notion of the First World and Third World into the discursive making of the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ categories that still hold so much power to this day.

4.3 Differentiation between associates and non-associates

By the time G77 countries organised to demand generalised preferences within UNCTAD, eighteen associated African states and Madagascar, principally ex-colonies of Belgium and France, had already secured post-colonial trade preferences with the EEC under the Yaoundé Convention. The Community found themselves ‘in an awkward position’ because, in theory, they could not reject the idea of trade preferences, which already figured in their policy repertoire. Yet they also could not undo the ‘special’ trade preferences concluded under Yaoundé by generalising the same treatment towards all ‘developing’ countries (Grilli 1993, 23). This tension over GSP, far from the

Community's discourse of responsibly upholding a 'harmonious' international trade order, unleashed new political and economic divides between associated and non-associated countries from the Third World.

Associated African countries under the Yaoundé Convention showed great concern with the issue of reverse preferences. More broadly, G77 countries pointed to the 'protective effect' of the Community's association agreements with certain Third World countries that at the same time granted the EEC Six preferential access to their markets in return for the same trade treatment in EEC markets.¹⁰³ In UNCTAD negotiations, Global North delegations generally understood that a generalised regime of preferences would gradually phase out the policy of reverse preferences due to 'the domestic difficulties they would encounter in granting preferences to those developing countries which did not accord them equal treatment with other developed countries'.¹⁰⁴ The US considered that reciprocal preferences under Yaoundé were incompatible with the principle of generalised preferences advocated by G77. For the US, the fact that EEC exports could benefit on the markets of associated countries clashed with the principle of equitable burden-sharing that the Global North must concede to the Third World.¹⁰⁵

For their part, Associated African States and Malagasy (AASM) were forced to navigate the chasm between the EEC and the US on reverse preferences. By refusing the prerequisite set by Washington, AASM countries risked being deprived of current and future export possibilities for their manufactures to US markets. By renouncing reverse preferences, they risked the dissolution of their association with the EEC as a whole. Of equal importance were the concerns raised by African associates that their preferences would be eroded if the EEC opened its market to industrial goods from all Third World countries. In particular, 'young' African industries would be forced to compete with prospective GSP recipients like Argentina and Yugoslavia, which were considered

¹⁰³ Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30, p. 316.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ HAEC BDT 375/99; Proposition de résolution sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des pays en voie de développement; Documents de Séances, Document 116; Européen Parlement; 30 septembre 1970; Rapport intérimaire, Commission des relations économiques extérieures.

more competitive and already in ‘a considerable degree of development’.¹⁰⁶ In this context, Cote d’Ivoire, speaking on behalf of the AASM group, insisted that the Community’s proposed GSP policy ‘causes us some anxiety because it is too liberal and could diminish our own advantages’.¹⁰⁷ For African associates, the EEC policy being ‘too liberal’ implied the sharing of their trading advantages on the Common Market when they risked being excluded from the benefit of the generalised preferences of several other industrialised markets, including the US.

Given these uncertainties, African associates engaged on numerous occasions with the EEC during ad hoc meetings in Geneva, preparatory association committee meetings, and formal consultations at the ministerial level. The AASM group asked the Community for assurances that safeguard mechanisms would be put in place to ensure an effective protection of their interests, especially with respect to manufactures and processed agricultural goods they considered sensitive.¹⁰⁸ In an AASM–EEC Council meeting in Antananarivo in 1971, the African associates once again stressed that they considered a safeguard clause necessary to preserve their interests within an impending EEC GSP policy. The Commission reassured their African associates they would adhere to the principle of equitable distribution of burdens between GSP grantors to ensure the overall balance of GSP.¹⁰⁹

For the Community, ensuring the overall balance of GSP, however, meant ensuring the preservation of commercially motivated reverse preferences. The Committee on Relations with African and Malagasy Countries at the European Parliament had this to say on the matter:

Wouldn’t it be more realistic to recognise that maintaining the commercial aspect of the Yaoundé association (special preferences and reverse preferences) responds precisely to the particular

¹⁰⁶ HAEC BDT 375/99, Avis de la commission des relations avec les pays africains et malgache, Rédacteur : M. Fellermaier, Européen Parlement, 30 septembre 1970, Document 115, Document de séance, Rapport intérimaire, Commission des relations économique extérieures, Sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des PVD, Rapporteur: M. Westerterp.

¹⁰⁷ « nous cause une certaine inquiétude parce qu’elle est trop libérale et qu’elle pourrait amoindrir nos propres » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 473, 18 décembre 1970, 2332/70 (ASS 1433), Le Conseil, Note d’information.

¹⁰⁸ HAEC BDT 375/99, 21 septembre 1970, SEC(70) 3318 final, Préférences généralisées en faveur des produits manufactures et semi-manufactures des PVD, Préparation des consultation avec les États africains et malgache associés, les 23 et 30 septembre 1970, Communication de la Commission au Conseil.

¹⁰⁹ HAEC BAC 25/1980 No. 332, 5 May 1971, Commission des Communautés Européennes, Secrétariat général, SEC(71) 1615, RESTREINT, 11ème REUNION DU CONSEIL D’ASSOCIATION CEE–EAMA AU NIVEAU MINISTERIAL (compte rendu succinct).

needs of the AASM, which are among the least favoured countries of the Third World? [...] The EEC must, therefore, take a resolute action, within the framework of the negotiations in progress, for the defense of the association, since the social and political consequences that would result in Africa from the weakening of the association could be grave.¹¹⁰

By defending reverse preferences, the Community would reconfirm its attachment to the principle of mutual trade enshrined in the association agreements. By virtue of this principle, African associates were in theory entitled to tariff autonomy vis-à-vis third countries. Emphasising the sovereignty of the AASM group, the European Parliament reasoned that the associates would be in a position, if necessary, to negotiate tariff adjustments with third countries if this turned out to be essential for the ‘harmonious’ development of international trade.¹¹¹ In other words, the onus would be upon African associates to solve the problem of reverse preferences with other industrialised powers, including the US.

The EEC ascribed great importance to its policy of reverse preferences, even in the early days of UNCTAD, due to ‘the important role that established trade links played in the pattern of exports and imports of the developing countries’.¹¹² In negotiating the legal and political aspects of the generalised preferences vis-à-vis reverse preferences for associates, the Community hammered an agreement with the AASM group. For the Community, the Yaoundé Convention ‘should not constitute an obstacle to the establishment of a system of generalised preferences in favour of all developing countries and the establishment of such a system cannot give the AASM a right to any compensation from the EEC or anyone’.¹¹³ Indeed, the Commission believed that the

¹¹⁰ « Ne serait-il pas plus réaliste de reconnaître que le maintien du volet commercial de l’association de Yaoundé (préférences spéciales et préférences inverses) répond justement aux besoins particuliers des EAMA, qui figurent parmi les pays les moins favorisés du tiers monde ? [...] La CEE doit donc entreprendre une action résolue, dans le cadre des négociations en cours, pour la défense de l’association, car les conséquences sociales et politiques qui résulteraient en Afrique de l’affaiblissement de l’association pourraient être sérieuses » HAEC BDT 375/99, Interim report by M. Westerterp on the implementation of generalised preferences in favour of finished and semi-finished products from developing countries, 30 September 1970.

¹¹¹ HAEC BDT 375/99, Avis de la commission des relations avec les pays africains et malgache, Européen Parlement, 30 septembre 1970, Document 115, Document de séance, Rapport intérimaire, Commission des relations économique extérieures, Sur la mise en œuvre des préférences généralisées en faveur des produits finis et semi-finis des PVD, Rapporteur : M. Westerterp.

¹¹² Proceedings of the United Nations Conference on TRADE AND DEVELOPMENT, Geneva, 23 March—16 June 1964, Volume I, FINAL ACT AND REPORT, E/CONF.46/C.5/SR.30, p. 316.

¹¹³ « la nouvelle Convention devrait conduire à une entente avec les EAMA sur le fait que cette Convention ne doit pas constituer un obstacle à l’instauration d’un système de préférences généralisées en faveur de l’ensemble des pays en voie de développement et que l’institution d’un tel système ne peut donner aux EAMA un droit quelconque à des

implementation of generalised preferences should not have the effect of diluting the advantages ‘enjoyed’ by African associates on the Common Market.

The Commission, thus, justified the compatibility between generalised preferences and existing ‘special’ preferences within the framework of EEC associations. Given the economic conditions prevailing in Africa, the preferences established by the association agreements and conventions pertained essentially to primary commodities and processed agricultural products. In the Community’s view, these were practically the only products that African associates were in a position to export as things stood in the 1970s. The Commission explained further that since the generalised preferences did not intend to cover basic products and hardly any processed agricultural products, particularly those exported by the AASM, they in no way affected the preferential margins African associates had on Community markets. As for manufactured products, the Commission stated they used all the possibilities of ‘safeguard’ mechanism, such as negative list of sensitive products, butoirs, and the calculation of ceilings, in order to maintain the advantages reserved for its associated partners. With these orientations, the Commission claimed they garnered the support of African associates for the principle of generalised preferences and to assuage their African partners’ preoccupations and disenchantment in the face of being ‘doubly penalised’:

on the one hand, they bear the sacrifice of sharing their preferences and, on the other hand, access to certain main preferential markets could be refused to them because of the advantages which they themselves grant to the Community within the framework of their association. It is to be hoped that this last question does not result in a split between the developing countries themselves – between these countries and certain industrialised countries. Generalised preferences tend towards the elimination of discrimination, not towards aggravation of discrimination among developing countries.¹¹⁴

compensations de la part de la CEE ou de qui que ce soit » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1172, Commission, DG RELEX, 5 July 1968, Note a l’attention de monsieur Le Président Rey (sous le couvert de M. Martino, membre de la Commission, Objet : Échange de vues avec une délégation des Etats-Unis sur la suite à donner à la résolution de la Conférence de New-Delhi sur la question des préférences (18 juillet 1968).

¹¹⁴ « d’une part, ils supportent le sacrifice du partage de leurs préférences et, d’autre part, l’accès à certains principaux marchés préférentiels pourrait leur être refusé en raison des avantages qu’eux-mêmes accordent à la Communauté dans le cadre de leur association. Il faut souhaiter que cette dernière question n’aboutisse pas à une cassure entre les pays en développement eux-mêmes o entre ces pays et certains pays industrialisés. Les préférences généralisées tendent vers l’élimination de la discrimination - et non pas vers une aggravation de la discrimination parmi les pays en voie de développement » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1941, Information note by the Commission on the EEC and generalised preferences in favour of semi-finished products and manufactures from developing countries, June 1971.

The EEC's attachment to reverse preferences was put to the test when, in the early 1970s, it was time to renegotiate the Yaoundé Convention between an enlarged Community, joined by Denmark, Ireland, and the UK as new member states, and a similarly enlarged African, Caribbean, and Pacific group of states (ACP), now comprised of 46 'post-colonial' countries. If GSP signalled a more global shift in the Community's trade relations with the Third World, the 1975 Lomé Convention fractured the francophone focus of Yaoundé via the accession of Britain 'bringing its own set of ties with the developing world and requiring an expansion in the architecture of [EEC] development policy' (Holland and Doidge 2012, 2–3). Despite the EEC's earlier enthusiasm to defend its policy of associationism based on free trade, Lomé abandoned the principle of reverse preferences, not least due to the ACP's united front in rejecting reciprocal trade relations with Western Europe. Despite French intransigence to prolong preferential access to the markets of the Community's associates, the rest of the EEC Nine, save Belgium and Italy, favoured a non-reciprocal trade agreement with the ACP (Drieghe 2020). With reverse preferences revoked, a conflict of interest between the GSP regime and the Lomé Convention ensued. ACP countries:

believe that any extension or widening of the Community's system of generalised preferences [...] would represent an erosion of the benefits that the ACP States hope to derive from the Lomé Convention. Accepting, however, that the Generalised System of Preferences cannot be a static instrument, we feel compelled to emphasise that its extension must be done in such a way that the erosion of the advantages stipulated in the Lomé Convention is minimised.¹¹⁵

In private, the Commission forcefully dismissed this line of reasoning as an 'old argument' based on a fundamental misconception and accused the ACP of unjustly demanding compensation and exercising 'a kind of veto' whenever market access for GSP targets was enhanced:

The trade provisions of both Lomé I and II give the ACP duty-free access without quantitative restrictions on at least 96 % of their exports to the EC. It is therefore quite wrong to talk of erosion of their preferential regime as the result of improvements in the GSP since by definition their preferential status cannot be improved upon. What the ACP are in fact after more often than not is some kind of compensation if the GSP is improved, a request which the [EEC] has repeatedly

¹¹⁵ « Nous estimons que toute extension ou tout élargissement du Système Communautaire des Préférences Généralisées allant au-delà du présent accord représenterait une érosion des avantages que les États ACP espèrent tirer de la Convention de Lomé. En acceptant toutefois que le Système des Préférences Généralisées ne peut être un instrument statique, nous nous voyons dans l'obligation de souligner que son extension doit être faite de telle sorte que l'érosion des avantages stipulés dans la Convention de Lomé soit minimisée » HAEC BAC 38/1984 No. 321, ACP memorandum on the Commission's proposal concerning the Community's GSP for 1976, 20 October 1975, ACP/N.319/75.

refused for the reason that this would in effect allow the ACP a kind of veto on improvements for Non-Associate Developing [sic] – though this is not a line of argument which is advisable to come out with publicly.¹¹⁶

The Commission continued by discrediting the ACP's competence to substantiate its 'wild and extravagant' claims about preference erosion vis-à-vis non-associated GSP targets:

Under Lomé the ACP are also entitled to consultation on changes in the GSP. Should the question be raised, it should be firmly insisted that the Commission has faithfully observed not merely the letter but the spirit of this procedure. The ACP are liable to come out with wild and extravagant charges about the GSP, which in practice they have totally failed to substantiate. Their organisation in Brussels has over the years shown itself to be badly organised and although given ample time to react often incapable of any coherent response. This year there is more of an excuse because their administrative resources have been almost entirely given over to the negotiation and now the ratification and signature of Lomé.¹¹⁷

Tensions between associates and non-associates continued to vex the Community in future efforts to reform the GSP regime. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) accused the Community of favouritism and of its 'traditionally protective' stance regarding its associates. ASEAN expressed concern with the increasing tendency of Brussels 'to accommodate the demands of certain associated developing countries not to accord improvements to the GSP policy. This move cannot be justified especially when the countries concerned do not have the capacity to meet the Community's import requirement, particularly in respect of products of export interest to ASEAN'.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 327, Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General for External Relations, Session of European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15 November 1979, Speaking Notes on report and draft opinion by Mr Andrew PEARCE on the proposals for the EC's 1980 GSP Scheme.

¹¹⁷ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 327, Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General for External Relations, Session of European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15 November 1979, Speaking Notes on report and draft opinion by Mr Andrew PEARCE on the proposals for the EC's 1980 GSP Scheme.

¹¹⁸ HAEC BAC/1984 No. 327, ASEAN Memorandum on GSP beyond 1980, 12 February 1980, ASEAN Brussels Committee, No. ABC/22/80/SEC 311/2523.

4.4 British Empire redux through European enlargement

In the context of Britain's EEC membership, the link of preference-giving to colonial/modern relations became more explicitly pronounced. The British Empire had boasted a long history of granting 'imperial preferences' to tighten its grip over colonies (Toye 2003; Shaffer and Apea 2005). Here, preferences embodied the 'white man's burden' to stimulate progress in 'uncivilised' lands. They also served as a way for colonial powers to propagate their interests in competition with one another. For instance, Britain offered preferential market access to colonies that aided the UK in World War I. For Britain, trade preferences therefore served traditionally as 'not simply handouts but part of larger imperial policies' (Shaffer and Apea 2005, 493) and 'as a means of reinforcing Commonwealth ties' (Toye 2003, 916–17). At the same time, through policies of associationism and generalised preferences, European enlargement served as a mechanism for supposedly 'ex-colonial' powers 'to perpetuate basically traditional relations with ex-colonies under a new guise' (Holland and Doidge 2012, 136). Thanks to the French veto on British membership in 1963, the EEC Six had avoided the problem of dealing with Britain's formal ex-colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. However, this problem could no longer be swept under the rug when Britain finally joined the EEC family in 1973 (Grilli 1993, 21). In earlier UNCTAD negotiations, London allayed fears expressed about British membership in the EEC and its possible reverberations on Third World economies:

We had set out quite clearly that we aim to join a Community which is already very conscious of its responsibilities to the Third World. [...] It will be our aim in the enlarged Community to build a strong and united Europe for only in this way can new markets and more aid for less prosperous countries be provided on anything like the scale required.¹¹⁹

In terms of the Lomé Convention, Britain's accession reinforced the preferential status of Africa on the Common Market and extended this 'privilege' to the Caribbean and the Pacific, effectively sidelining the interests of previously colonised countries in Latin America (Holland and Doidge 2012, 136). Similarly, Lomé tilted in effect the policy focus away from Asia, in particular Britain's Asian Commonwealth as well as Hong Kong as a dependent territory. The Community sought to rectify this neglect by virtue of GSP, which generally functioned as a less preferential arrangement

¹¹⁹ HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 473, 9 September 1971, Cable from di Martino on the 11th UNCTAD session to Director General Sigrist, Commission of the European Economic Community.

for these two geographical entities, albeit one that intended to preserve ‘traditional’ Commonwealth trading patterns.

The EEC Nine signed a Joint Declaration of Intent in consideration of ordering future trade relations with independent Commonwealth countries, namely India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. The Community confirmed its readiness to find suitable arrangements for trade-related problems that may materialise for Asian Commonwealth countries as a result of European enlargement through intense bilateral negotiations with countries concerned (see Ghai 1974).

One such trade nuisance revolved around ‘Virginia flue-cured’ tobacco that India had been accustomed to exporting to Britain, reflecting ‘a traditional pattern of trade over many decades and even generations’.¹²⁰ On 2 July 1974, the Indian Mission in Brussels officially lodged a request with the Community on the application of special measures in the framework of GSP 1975 in favour of the tobacco variety of particular commercial interest to India.¹²¹ Yet this incited a debate on the possibility of breaking old circuits of colonial trade destined for the British metropole and the compatibility of the Community’s responsibilities under GSP and Lomé. In the European Parliament, British member Hugh William Mackay, 14th Lord Reay, argued that the Community ought not to instigate ‘freezing’ India’s patterns of tobacco trade with Britain. Meanwhile, French member Gabriel Kaspereit, chair of the Committee on Foreign Economic Relations, cautioned: ‘Let’s see that we do not injure our Association agreements’ by way of GSP amendments. Sir Christopher Soames, British Conservative politician and European Commissioner for External Relations, echoed the sentiments of Lord Reay and tried to soothe Mr Kaspereit’s qualms by framing GSP as ‘our chief weapon’ to defend traditional trade ties with Asian Commonwealth countries:

I agree that the last thing we want to do is to injure them, but the Joint Declaration of Intent is as central a feature of Community policies in regard to the developing world as is the Association agreement, as Lord Reay pointed out. It takes a different form, of course. There is no duty-free

¹²⁰ HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, Speech by Sir Christopher Soames, Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities, at a meeting by the Committee on Development and Cooperation at the European Parliament, October 1974.

¹²¹ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 330, Note verbale to the Indian Mission to EEC, DG RELEX, 22 July 1974.

entry; there is a preference. We are not giving duty-free entry to tobacco from India, because we want to maintain a preference for the Associated countries, which will be exporting their tobacco duty-free, but we shall be giving India a preference over the United States. Taking the normal tariff at 100%, we see that, roughly speaking, Indian tobacco will be coming in at half that, and tobacco from the Associated countries will be coming in at zero.

However, Lord Reay made the important point that our chief weapon to ensure that we live up to our obligations under the Declaration of Intent is the generalised preference scheme. It is for us to tailor the scheme in such a way as to ensure meeting its objectives—namely, that traditional trade between those countries and any part of the Community is not damaged by virtue of enlargement.¹²²

Recognising that the Community's enlargement could disrupt the colonially established flow of trade in Indian-grown tobacco and citing that the prevailing oil crisis at the time could especially hit countries like India, the EEC decided that GSP could solve this predicament. Consequently, GSP 1975 exceptionally included transitional tariff preferences for Virginia flue-cured tobacco in favour of India.¹²³

Apart from the Asian Commonwealth, the Community had to grapple with the issue of Hong Kong as a territory dependent on the UK. Due to stiffer competition, London's looming EEC membership threatened to hurt Hong Kong's traditional flow of trade to the British market and even more so, should the Community exclude Hong Kong from its GSP regime. Britain invoked the notion of 'burden-sharing' among industrial powers and the responsibility of an expanded EEC towards Hong Kong:

It would, in Her Majesty's Government's view, be advantageous for both the United Kingdom and the European Communities to deal with Hong Kong in the context of the generalised preference scheme, where the accepted principle of 'burden sharing' among donors would lighten the load. A decision by the European Communities to exclude Hong Kong from the scope of their offer would certainly lead all other donors into similar action, thus complicating the handling of the problem of Hong Kong in the enlargement negotiations; conversely, there is good reason to believe that, if the European Communities include Hong Kong, the United States might well agree to include Hong Kong in their scheme. [...]

¹²² HAEC BAC 136/1987 No. 379, Speech by Sir Christopher Soames, Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities, at a meeting by the Committee on Development and Cooperation at the European Parliament, October 1974.

¹²³ HAEC BAC 97/1986 No. 45, REGULATION (EEC) No 3015/75 OF THE COUNCIL of 17 November 1975 opening, allocating and providing for the administration of a Community tariff quota for raw or unmanufactured flue-cured Virginia type tobacco originating in developing countries.

It has been argued that ‘territories’ should not benefit from generalised preferences, because they are the responsibility of a single metropolitan power. If this argument is maintained by opponents of Hong Kong’s inclusion in the Generalised Preference Scheme, they must then accept the enlarged Community’s responsibility for Hong Kong in the negotiations for the enlargement of the Communities.¹²⁴

Although GSP 1971 eventually included Hong Kong despite earlier EEC Six squabbles, the colonial territory’s textile and footwear exports could not specifically qualify for any preferential treatment as ‘sensitive’ products. Evidently, the idea of conceding tariff preferences to relatively competitive economies like Hong Kong preoccupied EEC member states. In line with the Joint Declaration of Intent, it became incumbent upon Britain post-1973 to press for a more preferential treatment for Hong Kong in the EEC Nine’s GSP policy. Yet the Hong Kong question did not merit any favourable resolution in the context of GSP reform cycles in 1974, 1975, and 1976.

From the perspective of Hong Kong, the existing safeguard mechanism for textiles under the Community’s scheme could sufficiently address any ‘extraordinary movement’ in textile exports from Hong Kong and other GSP targets. In addition, the provisions of the Multi-Fiber Agreement—an arrangement imposing quotas on international trade in textiles, signed by both the EEC and the UK, acting on behalf of Hong Kong—afforded further assurances to Common Market competitors in the sector. As such, the Hong Kong government argued that there was no justification whatsoever for the prevailing discriminatory character of EEC GSP policy. They maintained that their ‘footwear industry has all the characteristics of the kind of industry which the Generalised Schemes of Preference are generally designed to assist and its performance certainly does not justify discrimination against its exports’.¹²⁵ In the context of rising import prices, aggravated by the oil crisis in the seventies, Hong Kong reminded the Community that its textiles represented over 50% of the external trade of Hong Kong, an export sector on which ‘Hong Kong’s economic and therefore political viability in South East Asia literally depend’. The territory blamed the continued discrimination against Hong Kong textiles on EEC markets and how this contributed to its ‘unusual economic recession from which it can emerge only by continued equitable access for its products in the markets of developed countries’.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ HAEC BAC/1987 No. 145/2, Aide-mémoire, UK Delegation to the European Communities, 9 July 1970.

¹²⁵ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 330, Memorandum from the Counsellor for Hong Kong Commercial Affairs on the Community’s Generalized Scheme of Preferences, 14 June 1974.

¹²⁶ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, Note verbale from the Minister for Hong Kong Commercial Relations, 2 May 1975.

Given this impasse, Britain and Hong Kong, eager to find a compromise, held several consultations with the Commission in London and Brussels in 1975. One of the possible orientations at that time concerned ‘the possibilities of favouring the colony in the area of non-sensitive textiles under GSP’.¹²⁷ Confronted with the issue of ‘very competitive’ users of GSP, the Community leveraged this orientation to reinforce growing concerns over the need to further differentiate between GSP targets. Dehumanising GSP targets as ‘greyhounds’ in an internal document, DG External Relations stressed the importance of ‘obviating the intense scramble’ to snap up preferential treatment, which traditionally left ‘less aggressive or well organised exporters than Hong Kong [...] liable to find themselves arriving too late to get any preferences’.¹²⁸ With Hong Kong in the scheme, protectionist tendencies vis-à-vis ‘less aggressive’ Asian Commonwealth countries in an enlarged Common Market could be assuaged more easily:

it is only on the basis of including Hong Kong that the differentiation between competitive and less favoured countries can be sold to the outside world, with its fundamental structural component of easier treatment for such countries as Pakistan and India, since these are already the two leading users of the GSP for textiles.¹²⁹

Even so, the EEC Nine remained divided. Britain and those in support of Hong Kong argued that the limited economic impact of the proposed measure on the EEC economy outweighed the ‘political value’ of a favourable gesture for Hong Kong’s textile trade. Those opposing the inclusion of Hong Kong, including the German delegation, argued that the ‘psychological repercussions’ that such an addition would have in view of the difficulties which the Community textile industries were allegedly experiencing should be considered. The opposing delegations observed in this context that the risk of a given textile product, considered to be non-sensitive becoming sensitive by the simple fact of the inclusion of new ‘beneficiaries’ could not be ignored. Similarly, they feared that the proposed inclusion might set a precedent for the inclusion of other non-sensitive products, emanating from Hong Kong and elsewhere, in the preference scheme.

¹²⁷ « des possibilités en faveur de la colonie dans la partie textiles SPG non sensibles » HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, Note a l’attention de M. le directeur général Loeff, Direction générale des affaires industrielles et technologiques, 31 janvier 1975, Le SGP textiles et Hong Kong.

¹²⁸ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 327, Commission of the European Communities, Directorate General for External Relations, Session of European Parliament, Strasbourg, 15 November 1979, Speaking Notes on report and draft opinion by Mr Andrew PEARCE on the proposals for the EC’s 1980 GSP Scheme.

¹²⁹ HAEC BAC 141/1987 No. 583, Draft speech on the new GSP regime for textiles, n.d.

They also wondered about the advisability of granting preferences for textiles to certain territories, and notably to Hong Kong, which they perceived already ‘highly competitive’ in this sector. Finally, their opposition pointed to the fact that the US did not propose to grant special preferences to textile products.¹³⁰

A breakthrough emerged in November 1975 when the Council agreed to deal with dependent territories in view of GSP 1977:

The problem of including dependent countries and territories among the beneficiaries of the GSP for textile products will be examined in the course of 1976. [...] This solution will take account, in particular, of the importance of restricting, by means of non-discriminatory treatment, the preferences under the GSP enjoyed by all the most competitive countries and making the system more flexible with regard to the least favoured beneficiaries.¹³¹

A year later, all EEC member states, except Germany, agreed with Britain on the inclusion of dependent territories and in effect the extension of preferences on textiles from Hong Kong. Having the ‘undoubted political benefits’ in mind in terms of enhancing the preferential status of ‘less competitive’ GSP targets like India and Pakistan, the Commission insisted to bring closure to the question of ‘more competitive’ dependent territories like Hong Kong:

The demand for the inclusion of dependent territories including Hong Kong has now been put forward by a Member State of the Community, the United Kingdom, for three years running and it is politically unwise to continue to reject this request, especially when the likely impact of including Hong Kong has been measured and found to be relatively modest. [...]

[The] existence of the GSP Scheme for textiles does bring us undoubted political benefits, particularly in our relations with Pakistan and India. The inclusion of Hong Kong will not merely satisfy public opinion there, but will enable us to tilt the balance even more in favour of Pakistan and India, with the resultant political bonus, which is acquired without having to pay any serious economic price.¹³²

¹³⁰ HAEC BAC 97/1986 No. 45, Note: Preparation of the Communities Generalized Tariff Preferences Scheme for 1976, The Council, 8 October 1975, S/1347/75 (COMER 396).

¹³¹ HAEC BAC 141/1987 No. 583, Statement approved by the Council at its meeting on 5–6 November 1975, Inclusion of dependent territories in the GSP for textiles.

¹³² HAEC BAC 141/1987 No. 583, DG RELEX’s speaking note for Mr Gundelach (under cover Cabinet Soames), The Community’s GSP Scheme for 1977, 18 November 1976.

In the end, Germany singled itself out in opposition to the Hong Kong question. In 1977, the Council finally liberalised tariff preferences for certain textile products exported by Third World countries and territories.¹³³ This policy decision meant success for Britain's advocacy for the end of EEC discrimination against its dependent territory, as Hong Kong's non-sensitive textile products, subject to the operation of tariff ceilings, could now enter the Common Market preferentially. At the same time, the eventual inclusion of Hong Kong provided the Community with the discursive basis for further differentiating between GSP targets considered 'highly capable' (e.g., Hong Kong) and 'least favoured' (e.g., India and Pakistan).

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have contradicted the EEC's discourse of interdependent trade relations with the global souths by generating an alternative interpretation of the GSP policy. In doing so, I have exposed three key tensions from the historical archives. First, defining the 'developing' world, for the EEC, entailed a highly politicised process of arbitrarily formalising categories of difference between GSP targets, driven by parochial considerations about who could and could not claim entitlements to the GSP regime. Second, the Community's GSP policy fractured the Third World by differentiating between associated African countries and non-associated G77 countries. Finally, GSP regurgitated colonial/modern logics as the UK defended to preserve its traditional commercial ties with Asian Commonwealth countries and Hong Kong as a dependent territory in an enlarged EEC. Furthermore, the inclusion of Britain's ex-colonies and dependent territories demanded the further differentiation between the GSP targets on competitiveness grounds, even dehumanising them as 'greyhounds' jostling for preferences, which enabled the Community to prefer some targets more than others.

Historicising the EU's GSP policy creates openings for critical interpretations, not least because taken-for-granted scholarly and political discourses often neglect, or are silent on, how generalised preferences are inscribed into colonial/modern relations and Third World struggles for undoing

¹³³ COUNCIL REGULATION (EEC) No 2706/77 of 28 November 1977, opening, allocating and providing for the administration of Community tariff preferences for textile products originating in developing countries and territories.

economic imperialism and dependency in the global order. Indeed, it is imperative to recognise that ‘the former imperial preference schemes were the predecessors of GSP schemes today, which the GSP was intended to replace on a “generalized” basis, but which it also, in part, replicated. The imperial programmes contained the “a priori” safeguard limitations that are a part of [...] [EEC] statutes, and could be modified by the grantors at the grantor’s will’ (Shaffer and Apea 2005, 493–94).

Importantly, the EU’s historical archives reveal that rather than upending dependent economic relations, GSP discursively reinforced traditional patterns of trade between the metropole and (ex-)colonies within an enlarged Community. This point cannot be stressed enough, particularly in the context of the ‘Geopolitical Europe’ discourse being brandished in Brussels these days and propagated as a scholarly undertaking. It is true that the EU has increasingly wielded trade as a geopolitical tool, not least through its adoption of economic sanctions against Moscow following Russia’s war against Ukraine. However, it seems to me that this ‘new’ geopoliticisation story tends to dwell more on the EU’s relations with other so-called ‘great powers’ (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Olsen 2022). This thinking is analytically constraining because the external politicisation of trade that continues to undergird the EU’s non-reciprocal commercial dealings with the global souths must also be read *geopolitically* beyond the narrow realist connotation of the term. This becomes especially evident in relation to the EU’s ‘performance of power’ in the conditionality discourse surrounding GSP sanctions today (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). The alternative interpretation I have developed here demonstrates the ways in which GSP has always been geopolitical since its beginnings in the sixties and seventies when it comes to global issues of market access. Today, however, equally ingrained in the GSP regime is the *imperative of ordering* to discipline and to organise market relations between the EU as ‘intervener’ and the global souths as ‘targets’ whose ways of living and political behaviour ought to be reformed by international expertise, assistance, and intervention (Sabaratnam 2017, 4).

Finally, recovering alternative historiographies of the EU GSP policy challenges the Eurocentrism that permeates EU trade policy scholarship, often submerging the histories of Europe’s presumed ‘others’ (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). Doing so makes it possible to think about doing EU trade scholarship in another way ‘by opening the field more to other historical knowledges, which

get suffocated to some extent, because they are often not seen as part of the discipline despite their importance to understanding contemporary EU external relations' (ibid., 197).

PART III: INTERROGATING THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON EU GSP

5. ‘If we’re partners, you’re not a small child!’: Entangling GSP and the enforcement of international conventions through political conditionality

Antonio: Some would argue that perhaps this [GSP] is a new form of controlling kind of post-colonial societies. And so, the idea of GSP perhaps as a way to prop up new colonial patterns. Any-any-any views on—

Development policy expert: Yes, I would not call that colonial, because colonial [means] you have no choice. [laughing] Colonial powers were imposing their preferences and their choices on their colonies. In this case, this thing, it’s more kind of norm—you know exportation of the norms and trying to be an international norm-setter and influence norms. But nothing forces a country. (Interview 15)

5.1 Introduction

Third World struggles for another global economic order permeated the broader milieu of decolonisation in the sixties and seventies. In this context, the EU has entrenched its GSP regime as a development policy in favour of the ‘tiers monde’. For over five decades now, GSP has unilaterally opened the European single market to exports from the global souths without asking market access concessions in return. Yet the EU is today asserting an increasingly muscular GSP regime through political conditionalities, monitoring missions, and sanctions. At the same time, the EU exploits these technologies to distinguish its ‘normative’ standing as a global power that claims to promote global norms by obliging GSP targets to respect a panoply of international conventions. Indeed, since the Lisbon Treaty, the European Parliament has ‘started to bear its teeth and show its power’ in demanding a more normative EU trade agenda (Interview 54) and instrumentalising trade for political ends, especially since GSP concerns two billion people in more than 60 countries around the world (EP17). GSP is no longer just GSP; more than market access preoccupations in the pre-Lisbon Treaty era, GSP today reflects the geopolitical climate in an EU intent on pushing the Green Deal and grappling with many ‘crises’, including the policy world of asylum and migration, through trade. In this light, the Co-Father of GSP¹³⁴ at DG Trade hopes that the GSP regime ‘won’t be the victim of its own success because it has raised expectations about what we can do, what we should do’ (Interview 42).

¹³⁴ My interlocutor at EEAS used this moniker to describe one of the policy officials at DG Trade in charge of co-producing the GSP regulation. It seems to me this interlocutor implicitly referred to himself as the other ‘Co-Father’.

In this chapter, I take seriously ‘the construction of a “thicker” picture of European trade policy [which] will require that we look at the commitments and world views of the people involved in producing it’ (Bollen 2018, 202). Drawing on 65 semi-structured interviews with trade policy elites in Brussels, I explicate the discursive terrain over GSP and its political significance as seen by policy elites across various sites of power: European Commission, European Parliament, member states, civil society, and business. In what follows, I contextualise, first, the *raison d’être* of GSP and how the EU differentiates between its targets, hence my usage of global souths in plural. Second, I emphasise the growing political demands in the EU to make GSP more normative and how these demands are framed through the official discourse of ‘partnerships’. Third, I zero in on the mechanisms of leverage that the EU employs to propagate international norms by means of preferential market access to the EU. Here, I call attention to sustainability and migration as two of the most salient political issues troubling the current institutional discussions, as I write this, on renovating the current GSP regulation set to lapse by the end of 2023. Finally, I close by framing and problematising the GSP ‘gaze’ within the broader context of the presumed shift from development cooperation to international partnerships in EU external relations.

5.2 Rationale of GSP and differentiation between targets

The EU differentiates between the intended targets of its GSP regime across three tiers (see Table 2 for a list of GSP targets as of January 2023). Standard GSP partially or fully waives import duties in the EU single market on two-thirds of all product lines for what are called low and lower-middle income countries. As a special incentive scheme for sustainable development and good governance, GSP+ brings all tariffs down to zero for the same product lines for so-called low- and lower-middle income countries based on economic categories by the World Bank (LEX2; LEX6). The EU views these countries as ‘vulnerable’ because their economies are not diversified enough or are not sufficiently integrated in the global trade order (LEX6). The logic is that the additional preferences under GSP+ serve as a ‘powerful incentive’ for vulnerable countries to respect and implement certain international conventions (EC1). Lastly, the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme liberalises all duties and quotas for all exports, except in the weapons trade, from what are categorised as ‘least developed’ countries. For the European Commission, EBA exists as a

‘radical’ and ‘effective’ engine that refocuses trade preferences in favour of the ‘most in need’ (EC1; EC4). By treating EBA targets differently compared to other ‘developing’ countries, the EU creates for them ‘more space to export to the EU than bigger, emerging economies – giving them a better chance to grow’ (EC8).

Table 2: List of GSP targets as of 1 January 2023

Standard GSP	GSP+	Everything But Arms	
Congo	Bolivia	Afghanistan	Liberia
Cook Islands	Cabo Verde	Angola	Madagascar
India	Kyrgyzstan	Bangladesh	Malawi
Indonesia	Mongolia	Benin	Mali
Kenya	Pakistan	Bhutan	Mauritania
Micronesia	The Philippines	Burkina Faso	Mozambique
Nigeria	Sri Lanka	Burma/Myanmar	Nepal
Niue	Uzbekistan	Burundi	Niger
Syria		Cambodia ¹³⁵	Rwanda
Tajikistan		Central African Republic	São Tomé & Príncipe
		Chad	Senegal
		Comoros Islands	Sierra Leone
		Democratic Republic of Congo	Solomon Islands
		Djibouti	Somalia
		Equatorial Guinea ¹³⁶	South Sudan
		Eritrea	Sudan
		Ethiopia	Tanzania
		Gambia	Timor-Leste
		Guinea	Togo
		Guinea-Bissau	Tuvalu
		Haiti	Uganda
		Kiribati	Vanuatu ¹³⁷
		Laos	Yemen
		Lesotho	Zambia

Source: European Commission (2023a)

For this reason, official EU discourse presents EBA as an ‘apolitical’ initiative recasting the ‘technocratic’ least-developed-country category ‘from an appellation for failure to a marker for opportunity’ (Lincoln 2008, 218). However, several scholarly accounts have challenged this belief by unmasking the political nature of EBA. Lincoln (2008, 225) contends that EBA has fomented

¹³⁵ Since 2020, the EU has withdrawn its duty-free and quota-free preferences partially and temporarily from Cambodia.

¹³⁶ Equatorial Guinea ‘graduated’ from the EBA scheme on 1 January 2021 after shedding its status as a ‘least developed country’ in 2017. Technically, it is ineligible to be subsumed under the standard GSP because it has been categorised as an ‘upper-middle income’ country with a per-capita income of USD 5,810 since 2020. See: GSP Hub (<https://gsphub.eu/country-info/Equatorial%20Guinea>).

¹³⁷ Vanuatu is set to ‘graduate’ from EBA on 1 January 2025.

further differentiation between ‘developing’ countries categorised as least developed/non-least developed and instigated ‘a de-historicising of a significant colonial relationship between North and South’. Faber and Orbie (2009) argue that the EU used the EBA initiative to divide the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States, to enforce neoliberal common agricultural policy reforms with a view to cushioning EU businesses from increased competition (especially in the sugar sector), and to secure the backing of ‘developing’ countries for multilateral trade liberalisation at the WTO. More recently, I argue that the European Commission, when dealing with ‘unruly’ EBA countries that stand accused of violating international norms, has emphasised the political necessity to withdraw trade preferences from Cambodia while de-emphasising this in the case of Myanmar so as not to jeopardise the EU’s neoliberal interests overseas (Alcazar III 2024).

The differentiation of target countries within GSP is central to the political significance that the EU attaches to its relations with the global souths as ‘partners’. Generally, the EU trade policymaking establishment in Brussels discursively preserves the *raison d’être* of the GSP policy as an instrument of partnerships through preferential trade. The three sub-schemes apparently ‘support stronger people-to-people and business-to-business links that enhance the EU’s overall bilateral relationships with GSP partners’ (EC33). For the GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade, the EU GSP coheres with UNCTAD’s long-standing vision to integrate the global souths in the world trading order and the WTO Enabling Clause aimed at offering market access to those who need it without any reciprocal treatment (Interviews 7; 32; see also EP9). To this end, the GSP policy intends primarily to alleviate poverty by helping target countries export more and diversify their economies, according to the GSP regulation (LEX2) and as maintained by various EU policy elites (e.g., BIZ18; EC13; MS1).

5.2.1 Enabling GSP targets to grow by trading more and better

By unilaterally opening its markets, the EU enables standard GSP, GSP+, and EBA targets to ‘develop’ by trading more with the EU. This predominantly unquestioned objective rests on the fundamental belief that trading with the EU/Europe is ‘good’. Yet numerous scholarly accounts have questioned this central belief, not least through Walter Rodney’s critique of how Europe ‘underdeveloped’ Africa by plundering its resources through unequal exchange and structural dependence in international trade (Rodney 1972). And how this plunder persists in neocolonial patterns of trade between African and EU countries (Langan 2018). Furthermore, neoliberal EU trade policies contradict their ‘pro-development’ discourse by causing economic harms to fishing communities, draining fish stocks, and restricting policy space for Africans in Africa (Gegout 2016). More broadly, in trade, Chang argues that ‘many Bad Samaritans [i.e., Western powers] are recommending free-trade, free-market policies to the poor countries in the honest but mistaken belief that those are the routes their own countries took in the past to become rich. But they are in fact making the lives of those whom they are trying to help more difficult’ by discouraging them to pursue industrial policy for ‘development’ (Chang 2007, xxiii).

Problematically, naming GSP-eligible countries as ‘beneficiaries’ already presupposes a particular logical conclusion: that the receiving end of preferences *benefits* under EU trade policy. GSP generates jobs. GSP helps exporters from poor countries compete in the single market. GSP lifts people out of poverty. GSP promotes sustainable development, especially in those ‘vulnerable’ countries under GSP+. GSP integrates the global souths better within regional and global value chains. Last but not least, GSP refocuses trade preferences in favour of the ‘most in need’, that is to say those ‘least developed’ countries under the EBA regime (e.g., BIZ9; EC3; EC12; EC17; EC30; EP9; MS1).

That said, GSP targets need time on their way to development, just as Europe has developed, says one trade diplomat from a EuroMed 9 member state:

You have a job in a Nike factory in Cambodia, for example. You can put your children to school. The children will grow and can study. And so, we will change his life. That would not be possible if his mother or father will not have [sic] that job. So, let’s see things in perspective, you know, and

don't try to have a result immediately [chuckling] which is not possible. Let's be frank. (Interview 11)

The implication of this statement is that, without the EU, social change in places like Cambodia would be difficult to imagine because GSP provides garment factory jobs and, in consequence, affords children the opportunity to go to school. In this sense, GSP societies 'enter a positive cycle of prosperity' in the words of the Federation of the European Sporting Goods Industry whose member companies heavily source from GSP targets in the clothing and garments trade (BIZ18). The frame of reference for this 'cycle of prosperity', however, shifts to Europe's own historical experience of growth, modernity, and development as something the rest must emulate. Swedish parliamentarian and European People's Party member Christofer Fjellner made this painfully clear at a debate on the implementation of GSP at the European Parliament in 2018:

Madam President, free trade is one of the best ways to lift countries out of poverty: history proves that with all accuracy. Let's take the Netherlands, for example, which developed when its citizens became freer to trade in the 17th century; and my own country, Sweden, started 100 years of growth in the 1870s when we opened up for trade. And growth miracles are not just a thing of the past: in Korea and, right now, China, they would not have happened if those countries had integrated [sic] into the world economy, and that is actually what is the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) is all about. I would call it the crown jewel of European trade policy because it tries to link poor countries into the world economy and lift them out of poverty. (EP10)

Apart from growing more through GSP, the global souths are induced by the EU to grow better. Indeed, GSP is today not only about the traditional liberalisation of tariffs. Since 2012, the EU has instituted the GSP+ mechanism within its common commercial policy. The plus in GSP+ signifies that receiving more market access to the EU comes with strings attached for targets. GSP+ incentivises 'vulnerable' countries from the global souths to ratify and implement 27 international conventions that the EU considers important in pursuing a more normative, value-based trade agenda globally (Table 3). Unlike standard GSP and EBA, there is no automaticity in granting GSP+, meaning that countries have to apply to gain more market access to the EU. The logic goes as follows. According to the Co-Father of GSP at the European External Action Service (EEAS), 'if you're poor enough as a least developed country, it's an automatic admission. If you're not poor enough but don't want to worry too much about the 27 conventions, it's also automatic admission' (Interview 1). Meanwhile, the Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade elaborates that the EU gives extra

preferences to ‘vulnerable’ countries for bearing the costs and burdens needed to meet their commitments under international conventions:

GSP+ actually drives all tariffs down to zero. So, it looks like EBA. It has more or less two-thirds to three-fourths of the products of EBA and drives everything again down to zero. So, if textile is 12, standard GSP is 9, GSP+ is 0, like EBA. So, that’s a huge incentive, you know. For certain sectors, tuna in the Philippines, [the normal tariff is] 20%. GSP+: zero. 20% in terms of economics, it’s huge! I mean it can keep you outside of the market or make you a stakeholder. So, it’s really big. And we say OK, we give you this benefit. Why? Because we know that if you want to correctly implement these [27] conventions, you have additional costs and burdens. And you know you’re middle-income, lower-middle-income economy, you’re economically vulnerable. Therefore, we give you these additional benefits to make it more attractive for you to implement these changes. (Interview 42)

From an EU perspective, GSP is widely seen as a ‘carrot and stick’ that either causes or acts as the necessary condition for social transformation in target countries. For example, the Socialists & Democrats Political Adviser at the European Parliament claims that if it weren’t for the EU GSP, addressing the problem of child labour in Uzbekistan would not have materialised:

It’s brought about debates in many countries where it wouldn’t happen, if it wasn’t for the GSP scheme. It’s brought about certain reforms. I mean I’m thinking about Uzbekistan, for example, you know. It is the most recent one that, you know, under the GSP+, if you go back ten years, I mean Uzbekistan was in a completely different situation, you know. We’re talking about widespread child labour everywhere, and now they’re in a position where they’re, you know, about to have GSP+, which I could never have imagined ten years ago. So, it’s a process of engagement that brings about a lot of change. (Interview 38)

In addition to this, I am struck by how not only *causally* but also *casually* change in the global souths is attributed to GSP. At the European Parliament in May 2022, I had the chance to observe as a non-participant a public hearing on the ‘next steps towards universal abolition of the death penalty’. Addressing the Sub-committee on Human Rights, Adriano Martins, a human rights policy officer at EEAS, reported on how the EU is working to end death penalty globally. Mr Martins affirmed that the EU is strategically using its trade leverage to discourage certain countries that have acceded to the Second Optional Protocol on the abolition of the death penalty under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights from reneging on their commitments. He claimed that it is particularly the trade leverage through the GSP+ mechanism that enables the EU ‘to have a strong influence’ over countries like Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines to discourage them from abandoning the convention. In addition, the policy officer assured the Sub-

committee that the Commission is hard at work supporting political leaders and civil society in GSP targets ‘who need to understand that abolition is the future, and death penalty is the past, and this has to be seen that way’. The implicit reading here is that, without GSP+ and the EU, target countries would have no incentive whatsoever NOT to reinstate lining up people on the death row. Personally, I am categorically against capital punishment, seeing state-sponsored killing in the Philippines used to be intimately and systematically linked with the Spanish, Japanese and American colonial administrations—with a view to quelling anticolonial dissent, ‘pacifying’ the ‘natives’, and then later crushing political opposition under the Marcos dictatorship (Tagayuna 2004; De Ungria and Jose 2020; Yuching 2022). Of course, the Philippines must not bring back death penalty. But the problem is that the EU becomes the centre of gravity of social transformation elsewhere. Instead of appreciating the full complexity of specific GSP contexts, solving political issues like the death penalty via GSP inadvertently place, with much ease, the EU as the entity that ‘impels ideas for change, disregarding the epistemic role of Filipinos who have clamored for social transformation long before “scorecard issues” concerning the Philippines have been made subject to GSP+ monitoring’ (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022, 75). Invariably, the EU shines as an exemplar for others to emulate, while the political contexts of its presumed others get subdued in this relationship.

5.2.2 Diversifying the economies of GSP targets

Aside from the key objective of improving market access, the second overarching goal of GSP is to diversify the economies of ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries. However, instead of export diversification, GSP tends to have promoted export dependencies in a single sector, most notably in the garments trade, not least in the contexts of Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar (Interviews 18; 51; BIZ12) or even deteriorated export diversification in terms of products from EBA target countries (EP9; EP14; BIZ9; BIZ16). This is ‘a problem that everyone is aware of’ in Brussels (Interview 34), thereby highlighting the need to curtail ‘the risk of being dependent on a very reduced number of industries’ (BIZ12).

DG Trade cautions that one should not underestimate export concentration under GSP, as there are presumably efficiency gains, too, in ‘moving up’ global value chains. The GSP Policy Officer

at DG Trade, for example, points to Bangladesh whose export concentration under EBA in ready-made garments is undeniable, but its imminent ‘graduation’ as a ‘least developed’ country is an ‘extraordinary success’. That said, DG Trade has thought of ways to improve the diversification dilemma, e.g., by enlarging product coverage and removing tariffs for more products. However, based on their economic simulations, these regulatory tweaks would not necessarily diversify export capacities in GSP targets since the policy problem seems ‘beyond the possibility of intervention by the EU in beneficiary countries’. One of the reasons for this, according to the GSP Policy Officer, could be that domestic policies and political priorities that aim to foster export diversification completely fall on the shoulders of GSP targets themselves (Interview 7).

As such, unilateral market opening in the EU should not be seen as a sufficient condition for export diversification in target countries, as argued by one development expert from a European think tank and the European People’s Party Political Adviser (Interviews 15; 34). In other words, political choices on the receiving end of preferences are necessary to accompany GSP and stimulate export diversification. For example, the Left Political Adviser in the European Parliament that targets must be ‘doing more for diversification’ and making sure that those who benefit from EU market access are not multinational companies looking to save labour costs and leverage cheaper prices in the garment sector (Interview 64). While generally expressing support for the developmental aims of GSP through market access, import-competing EU business groups believe ‘it would be best for them and for us if this progress would see a differentiation of the sectors that they have, instead of relying on only one sector’ (Interview 8). GSP targets should not ‘put eggs into one basket’ to ensure that not one country benefits from preferential tariffs in a given sector and that others benefit from GSP, too. For some, this line of reasoning entails the ‘graduation’ of certain product categories from GSP for countries that have become ‘too’ competitive players in these sectors (Interviews 10; 21).

5.2.3 Graduating up and out of GSP

Speaking of ‘graduation’, there is often a free trade logic behind the pyramidal differentiation of GSP targets (see Figure 6 for a schematic representation). The general idea is that targets graduate up and graduate out of the GSP regime as a gradual progression, often citing Vietnam’s

advancement from being a GSP target to a free trade partner of the EU (Interviews 1; 2; 9; 13; 17; 19; 24; 37; 39; 54; 60; 63). Increasingly, the EU expects to push more countries into the GSP+ tier (EC2; EP16), thereby effectively enlarging the number of target countries subject to formal monitoring by the EU. In particular, the GSP Reform Platform, a coalition of different civil society organisations, argues that EBA countries that ‘reach a 5% share of EBA preferential imports into the EU should automatically be placed under enhanced engagement to prepare them for an eventual graduation to GSP+’ (CS16). There is also a sense that, in terms of market access, target countries move from a much less secure unilateral GSP to a much deeper, more mature trading relationship with the EU (Interviews 3; 39; 59; EC20; CS18). DG Trade even emphasises that target countries themselves are participating in GSP with a view to moving from receiving unilateral preferences to eventually signing more mutual trade liberalisation with the EU (Interview 32), thus fulfilling the promise of ‘ever greater liberalisation’ envisioned from the start.¹³⁸ In the *Trade for All* strategy, the Commission expects ‘close to full reciprocity’ in terms market access from those graduating from GSP (EC3). Comparing the idea of GSP graduation to schooling, a trade diplomat from a Benelux member state explicates:

This is something that should happen gradually. This is a huge debate that, yeah, we should make these countries to be [sic] beneficiaries. Once they establish a good level of economic development, then, they should go on the next level of this scheme. So, it’s because the GSP has this development goal. It’s like school. Once you develop to a certain level, you should not be a beneficiary. But, of course, [laughing] this is a very, very long process, especially for these countries. (Interview 41)

This long process of GSP-assisted path to development implies moving upwards to more reciprocal trading agreements with the EU, which might require more ‘sacrifice’ on the part of partner countries in terms of liberalisation and reform, according to a policy official at the European Commission. Yet this transition promises a higher level of benefits since ‘countries that feel much mature enough can sort of engage in those negotiations rather than the GSP, if you understand what I mean’ (Interview 59). Here, the implicit understanding is that generalised preferences are unilateral and, therefore, much more insecure, less stable, and more limited in coverage than mutual trade liberalisation. In other words: freer trade. Nevertheless, prior to that eventuality,

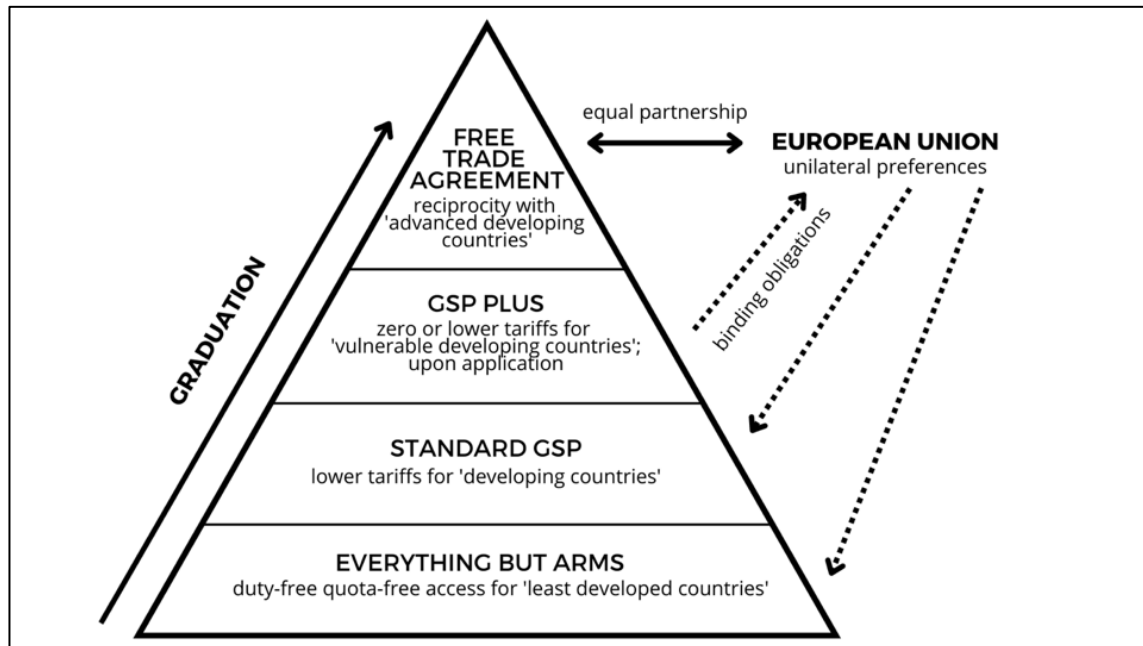
¹³⁸ HAEC BAC 48/1984 No. 332, M. Gaspari’s note to Sir Christopher Soames, Commission Vice-President, 27 February 1975, Our communication about the future development of the EEC GSP – Council meeting on 3 and 4 March 1975.

another policy official at the European Commission sees GSP as a means to address problems in target countries as they graduate up and out of GSP:

It is a measured way to engage with countries that have attained a certain level of economic development, but also for which there are still particular social environmental issues linked to that current state of development, because they have a certain place in the global supply chain. They take care of certain stages of production, which request an amount of workers, which also has its flaws. So, in a way I think it's tailored for a specific set of countries. And I wonder at some point when the scheme, if the scheme still exists in, I don't know, 20 years when we engage with African countries that might become manufacturing countries for the world. (Interview 13)

Trade preferences, particularly GSP+, are supposed to promote the idea of 'continuous sustainable development' by moving up global value chains and conditionally binding GSP to certain norms enshrined in internationally agreed conventions on fundamental and social rights. This linkage, then, is thought to 'lead to enhanced economic benefit for all'. From the European Commission's perspective, target countries graduating out of GSP stand to gain from broader economic benefits through a more enhanced commercial partnership with the EU, which has been a regional approach that concerns more Asian countries as opposed to African countries under EBA (Interview 13).

Figure 6: Graduating up and out of GSP



Source: My own elaboration

The prospect of graduation, however, is a politically charged issue among EU trade policymakers, especially the European Parliament. The Socialists & Democrats Political Adviser protests that certain targets seem unwilling to shed their ‘least developed’ status because this would mean forgoing their duty-free, quota-free access to the EU market:

How do I say this diplomatically? We have been concerned a little bit, the Parliament as a whole, that some countries, I don’t wanna say they-they-they cling to the status, but the whole point is, you know, sometimes some countries, some governments may not be prepared to put the work in to actually help themselves gradually, to elevate themselves at the value chain. [...] particularly Bangladesh could do a lot more work when it comes to being prepared to move up to a GSP+ country. But, you know, there is sometimes, perhaps, a tendency in some sectors, in some areas to kind of, I’ve got to choose my words carefully ‘cause I don’t want to patronise these countries or these sectors, but, you know, just to kind of continue profiting from the status that they have been having duty-free, quota-free [preferences]. (Interview 38)

At the same time, other ‘progressive’ voices point to the ‘hypocrisy’ of the EU’s pursuit of a value-based trade agenda through GSP. The Left Political Adviser criticises the paradox of asking GSP targets to respect human rights by ratifying and implementing international conventions. Yet the EU in the same breath has signed free trade agreements with countries like Chile, Colombia, or Israel where ‘violations of human rights are happening on a daily basis’, but the EU does nothing, let alone speak about these violations (Interview 18). A trade diplomat from a New Hanseatic League member state also highlights the limits of free trade agreements in terms of promoting sustainability. Here, the EU’s policy has been that the trade and sustainability chapters of its free trade agreements where international conventions are embedded should not be subject to dispute resolution, thereby effectively impeding their enforceability. This means that the EU cannot withdraw market access concessions in case its free trade partners breach their sustainability commitments, whereas in GSP the expectations to police and enforce are much more stringent (Interview 17).

Last but not least, other interlocutors talk about the dangers of moving from GSP to a free trade relationship with the EU. Maria Arena, former chair of the Sub-committee on Human Rights at the European Parliament, reasons that ‘for some countries it is a problem because they don’t have this [performing air quotes] Western country productivity and it can harm the local industry to have reciprocity’ (Interview 22). Relatedly, a civil society organiser in Brussels views GSP as

‘primarily an extraction-based scheme in the way it’s set up right now, where the Commission eventually obviously just wants to move towards free trade with all these players. But several of these countries are already saying we don’t want free trade. Then, they’ll be killed even more economically’ (Interview 12).

5.3 ‘Overloading the boat’: Making GSP more normative?

Beyond market access issues around GSP, the European Parliament as co-legislator of trade policy sees itself at the forefront in terms of demanding a more normative GSP (EP1; EP2; EP3; EP5; EP6; EP7; EP8; EP9; EP10; EP14; EP18; EP21), so much so that one trade diplomat from a New Hanseatic League member state dismisses EU parliamentarians as ‘really holier than the Pope when they discuss trade policy’ (Interview 17). Interpreting GSP more than a tariff scheme, the Parliament is generally in favour of placing stricter measures and stronger conditions on GSP ‘as a matter of principle’, boasts one policy officer (Interview 56).

From a Greens perspective, GSP is seen more than as a means of unilateral trade liberalisation, but rather more as a mechanism of leverage to promote the taking up of international conventions by GSP targets in the areas of human rights, labour standards, good governance, and environmental protection. This explicit linkage between trade and sustainable development, according to the Greens Political Adviser, lies ‘at the heart of the Greens’ approach to trade policy’ (Interview 33). Similarly, the Left Political Adviser also calls for ‘an effective conditionality’ linked to GSP and ‘an effective implementation’ of International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions and all other relevant conventions especially in the context of GSP+ and EBA (Interview 8). As for the Socialists & Democrats Political Adviser, the general orientation is to enlarge the list of international conventions attached to GSP that target countries need to respect (Interview 16). Moreover, Maria Arena, ex-chair of the Sub-committee on Human Rights and Socialists & Democrats member, asserts that the European Commission’s posture in its proposed GSP regulation seems to improve GSP only insofar as it relates to market access issues:

The only thing that they have put on board regarding sustainability is having a broad approach to new conventions, for example. But for the rest, it is more how to facilitate the market access for countries to remove these non-tariff and non-quota barriers to the European market. So, the drive is more trade and not really human rights. For me, we have to take this opportunity of the new

regulation to improve human rights with the countries with whom we are dealing under GSP. (Interview 22)

In support of the European Parliament's posture on GSP is a broad array of trade unions and industry associations who are calling for more structured civil society engagement in the governance and transparency of GSP, both in the EU and in target countries (Interviews 3; 12; 15; 35; 39; 45; 60; BIZ1; BIZ3; BIZ6; BIZ10; BIZ13; CS4). industriALL insists 'GSP is not a trade-only issue' (CS18). For Judith Kirton-Darling, Deputy General Secretary of industriALL, a global trade union federation, one of the major issues around GSP is that recipient countries are bound by commitments in terms of ILO and human rights conventions yet 'the monitoring done by the Commission is very untransparent at the moment. And there is a lot of arbitrary space for manoeuvre from the Commission. There's a lot of room for politics' (Interview 60). For industriALL, this lack of transparency makes it very difficult for NGOs, trade unions, civil society actors, and individuals to navigate GSP and to understand how change can be affected through the GSP regime.

Development policy practitioners, however, caution against placing many conditions on GSP that de facto limits the scope for preferential market access for the global souths and raise issues of policy incoherence. In this sense, 'you would have a perfect system but where almost no countries will be able to benefit from preferences [laughing]' (Interview 15), implying that virtually all GSP targets are problematic from the point of view of international conventions. According to a policy official at the European Commission, attaching more and more norms to GSP means trying to 'force in our different policy concerns' on GSP targets and yet those same norms are themselves being flouted by certain EU member states themselves:

GSP is seen as a kind of, you know, a tool to promote everything at the same time in a way because it really encompasses all of these European values that we're talking about. [smiling] And to be honest within the EU not everyone is as supportive of those values. [smiling] We cannot mention anyone specifically. But human rights and gender equality where certain member states do not want much reference to that in many policy documents. (Interview 6)

Organising the EU's trade relations with the global souths in this manner supposedly aligns with the idea of moving beyond donor-recipient relations towards partnerships as equals (Interviews 6; 15; 26; 40). As somebody from the EU business sector reflects: 'we cannot preach to developing

countries, but we need to convince them why we feel, why we think that the approach we have is good [smiling]' (Interview 10). This sentiment, of course, points to broader bureaucratic reorganisations within the European Commission, most notably in the metamorphosis of DG Development Cooperation to DG International Partnerships as 'a more modern way of looking at development' (Interview 6). For the European Conservatives & Reformists Political Adviser, the new GSP regulation embodies this shift:

From the Commission mandate, we don't have any more a commissioner for development aid. We have a commissioner for what? For partnerships. Partnerships, it means benefits and responsibilities. So, we are partners. If we are partners, you are not a small child! We help you, but you have to do something. (Interview 36)

Then, this partnership discourse is flanked by rationalisations that what is asked of GSP targets to respect are not EU norms but rather international norms for the 'good' of GSP targets. For example, in the context of Sri Lanka's accession to GSP+, this logic is made clear by Jean Lambert, speaking on behalf of the Greens and as chair of the South Asia delegation at the European Parliament: 'The implementation of these international norms—and I stress that these are not European Union wish lists, these are international norms—will be to the benefit of all Sri Lankans in many areas of everyday life' (EP3).

Similarly, the European Commission has also alluded to this discursive shift, albeit in a subtle way, in relevant policy documents. In its 2012 communication on tailoring trade and investment policy for those countries 'most in need', the European Commission regarded trade policy as a critical instrument in 'projecting EU values and interests in the world' (EC1). More recently, in its 2021 trade policy review towards an open, sustainable and assertive trade policy, the European Commission stresses the primary objective of generating employment globally 'based on international values and principles' through GSP (EC29). Arguably, this subtle discursive twist from overtly promoting EU values to championing core international norms (EC17) points to the growing realisation that things like human rights and good governance are no longer outside the competence of supranational trade policymakers as a reflection of 'the general blurring of boundaries between different policy communities' (EC32). More importantly, the emphasis on international norms eases that ways in which the EU uses its clout in trade and rationalises the need to transgress into the political contexts of GSP targets (EC7; EC17; EC18; EC20; EC21),

especially ‘those who go in the wrong direction’ (EC9). In this manner, the EU becomes well-poised to conveniently deflect accusations that they are acting ‘colonially’ since what they are policing, enforcing, and monitoring through GSP are international conventions, not homegrown EU norms.

Despite the significant leverage the EU believes it possesses thanks to the size of the single market, Sabine Weyand cautions us, ‘Trade policy is a powerful tool but has its limits—just as a boat does’. Writing in *The Economist*, the European Commission’s director-general for trade goes on to say: ‘No vessel can carry it all’ (EC32). One interlocutor from the civil society space in Brussels urged me to read this op-ed because ‘it gives you an insight into what DG Trade is thinking’. While yielding to the maritime metaphor of not ‘sinking’ the trade boat, they argue that ‘there are certain things [the Commission] could do to balance the relationship, even when it comes to countries in which they are trading on the basis of these unilateral preferences’ (Interview 12).

In the regulation of GSP, it is important to emphasise that the EU’s common commercial policy remains an almost exclusive supranational competence of the European Commission (EC32). In practice, this competence over GSP translates to a ‘good’ cooperation between DG Trade, EEAS, and DG Employment as the so-called *trias politica* or *le trio infernal*, as the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS informally puts it (Interview 1). The GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade as *chef de file* asserts that the GSP regime is, first and foremost, an instrument for trade, which is ‘why we are in this building’ (Interview 7). Here, the speaker, of course, points to the Charlemagne building as DG Trade territory, not The Capital building where EEAS sits, nor the Joseph II 27 building where DG Employment is housed, nor the Eurosquare building where DG International Partnerships works. Acknowledging other DGs harbour competing interpretations of GSP from purely pro-development positions to purely protectionist, the GSP Policy Officer stresses that it is important to make GSP manageable. In this case, political demands to ‘overload’ the GSP boat must be modulated because DG Trade generally considers GSP as a successful instrument, which entails keeping the same architecture, the same mechanism; and ‘intervening only in a targeted way’ (Interviews 7; 42). For DG Trade, this means being faithful to the development objective of GSP, while ensuring that GSP remains both economically meaningful for GSP targets and politically palatable for EU markets. The GSP Policy Officer claims that the GSP regime has reached an

‘ideal balance’ in terms of supporting the global souths and protecting EU firms. DG Trade’s job is to ‘keep the right balance’ (Interview 7).

Similarly, several trade diplomats from New Hanseatic League member states express concerns about the dangers of ‘overloading the boat’. As one diplomat exclaims: ‘We’re politicising this too much!’ (Interview 17). For some, it is crucial to find the balance between incentives to export to the EU and political obligations to comply with international conventions as ‘there’s only so much you can ask of beneficiary countries’ in a unilateral trade arrangement (Interview 51). Others ask whether adding more conventions to GSP would be ‘setting it up for failure’ and ‘change the GSP machine a lot’, particularly for ‘least developed’ countries. More formal obligations for ‘the most in need’ in terms of respecting international conventions would effectively ‘make it no longer Everything But Arms, but Everything But Arms plus’ (Interview 53) alluding, of course, to the ‘plus’ in GSP+, which means hard or ‘shall’ obligations towards the EU.

In the European Parliament, the European Conservatives & Reformists Political Adviser invokes the infamous 2013 Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh where many garment workers died due to a local garment factory collapse there. They say that some EU members of parliament are ‘impatient’ with the Bangladeshi government on delivering occupational health and safety reforms in the garment sector. Because of this, they claim that their group are playing a balancing act against political interests that want to ‘go very hard’ on targets like Bangladesh:

It’s a sort of political game [...] because we know that the Greens and the Socialists will go very hard against Bangladesh. So, we try to moderate a little bit to go to a different direction to find a balanced approach and to encourage. So, we are more in the position to encourage [...] because we know that others will be more punishing. (Interview 36)

On the significance of pursuing trade and norms jointly in GSP, Judith Kirton-Darling, Deputy General Secretary of industriALL, accepts the importance of preferential trade for countries to develop. That said, Kirton-Darling stresses that the EU needs to lay down transparent and reliable rules on the governance of GSP because:

the ambiguity in how GSP is implemented, the lack of transparency in the monitoring, the clear political kind of manoeuvring that goes on behind, actually undermines the GSP as a system in terms of political public trust [...] and then feeds those who would like to see a more protectionist

approach to trade. So, it's a balance. For us, it's a balance. [...] At the moment I think the general feeling is that the GSP isn't delivering, certainly not for the textile sector. (Interview 60)

From the point of view of a democracy NGO, one policy officer believes that the EU is trying through GSP+ to marry the trade agenda with international norms. Why have GSP+, they ask, when the EU could just 'give everybody free access' and when 'it's good for business obviously'? Yet this is, from their perspective, arguably not the case. The EU does not dole out free market access to everyone. For this speaker, the EU's imposition of conditions through the GSP regime is a 'commendable' attempt to bring trade and norms together. However, the same policy officer asserts that the EU needs to think about how to take GSP more seriously as a mechanism of leverage vis-à-vis the respect of international conventions by GSP targets (Interview 39). Thus, by emphasising the international character of the norms that the enforces through GSP, the EU legitimises the political conditionalities it inflicts upon GSP targets who are presented in need of assistance to bear the costs of implementing 'international' values or alternatively in need of more time to commit to those hard obligations.

5.4 We give you access to our markets, but...

The EU sees itself as a global power that propagates a value-based trade agenda externally. Within the policy world of GSP, this translates to the political conditionality that the EU attaches to market access in exchange for the respect of certain international conventions by target countries. The GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade states that the scheme is a 'point of pride' for Europeans because it 'promotes international standards that are not exclusively EU values'. In this sense, the EU 'does not bluntly export EU values' (Interview 7; see also CS21; EP13; EP17; EP19; EC31). The linkage of international conventions to the GSP policy remains unquestioned as it is 'part of the international legal order', boasts a cabinet member of the Vice President for Values and Transparency at the European Commission (Interview 46).

Through the GSP policy, the EU creates leverage over others and obliges targets to adhere to a repertoire of international norms. In the words of Marietje Schaake speaking on behalf of the Liberals & Democrats (now called Renew Europe) at a debate on the implementation of GSP at the European Parliament: 'our GSP system is a key example of how we use our economic power

to leverage our weight and to bring about positive change for people in third countries’ (EP10). The current GSP regulation differentiates between two sets of 27 international conventions. The first set pertains to core human and labour rights codified in 15 UN and ILO conventions, whereas the second set relates to environment and good governance principles enshrined in 12 international conventions. The new regulation, as proposed by the Commission, elongates the list of GSP-related norms by including more international conventions, most notably the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Meanwhile, the European Parliament has moved to include three more human rights conventions in the current GSP reform process (see Table 3).

This seemingly innocent bifurcation along thematic lines is central to explicating where the EU believes it possesses leverage over others in enforcing these international norms. On the one hand, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS sees the conventions on human and labour rights as ‘shall’ conventions as they pertain to more mandatory commitments and are considered to be more enforceable. This implies that targets *must* deliver on these ‘hard obligations’ because ‘there’s always the threat’ of GSP withdrawal, should countries be found by the UN or ILO to be ‘seriously’ and ‘systematically’ flouting human or labour rights. On the other hand, the GSP Co-Father at EEAS views the conventions on environment and good governance principles as ‘should’ conventions in the sense that they are more prescriptive commitments. Here, it is deemed harder to withdraw preferences in case a country lags behind these principles, thus making the imposition of negative conditionality more tenuous (Interview 1; see also EP17).¹³⁹

This mechanism of leverage operates through the binary notion of positive and negative conditionalities, or ‘the carrots and the sticks’ as expressed in the folk language of some people in Brussels (Interview 20; 60). Here, the three-tiered differentiation between GSP targets matters to the EU’s application of these ‘carrots’ and ‘sticks’. Under GSP+, target countries *shall* ratify and implement all international conventions annexed to the scheme. These obligations to the EU are legally binding because target countries themselves have to apply to fall into this category and be subject to EU monitoring. In return, as ‘vulnerable’ countries, they receive preferential market access to the EU more than standard GSP but less than EBA. This is positive conditionality or the

¹³⁹ According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, ‘shall’ is used to say that something certainly will or must happen, whereas ‘should’ is used to say or ask what the correct or best thing is to do.

carrot end of the scheme (Interviews 33; 51; see also CS13; CS17; CS21; EP17; EP19). Under standard GSP and EBA, target countries should have the ‘obligation not to commit any serious and systematic violations of the principles of the conventions’ on core human and labour rights (Interview 33). In other words, targets in these two tiers are not obligated to ratify and implement the relevant conventions; they *should* commit ‘no violation of the principles’ (Interview 33), making the respect of international norms ‘less of an active obligation’ (Interview 51). In cases of ‘serious and systematic violations’ of core human or labour rights principles, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS says ‘we act when there are serious issues happening’ (Interview 1). On paper, this points to the EU’s (threat of) withdrawing preferences from target countries flouting international norms. This is negative conditionality or the stick end of the scheme (Interviews 33; 51; see also CS13; CS21; EP17).

Under the new GSP proposed by the Commission, the negative conditionality has been extended to all the 32 international conventions, including climate, environment, and good governance principles (see Table 3). However, the key principle remains the same for standard GSP and EBA countries: generally committing no serious and systematic violations of all conventions without necessarily ratifying them. Otherwise, preferences may be withdrawn from them (Interview 33). According to a policy official at the European Commission, some services preferred to make the ratification of all 32 conventions mandatory for all standard GSP and EBA countries. As far as DG International Partnerships was concerned, this demand proved to be ‘unreasonable because [the EU] should keep that link to the more sort of positive conditionality as it’s called or linked to the attractiveness of the GSP+ scheme’. In short: to stay as close as possible to the differentiation between targets in terms of their EU-facing international obligations under GSP (Interview 59).

Meanwhile, a trade diplomat from a Baltic Assembly member state claims that, in general, the European Council does not want to ‘overburden the developing countries’ because they already have limited capacities and resources. The current list of 27 international conventions ‘already’ means a great deal of commitments from GSP targets. Instead, the general view is that the focus of the new regulation should be on the implementation and monitoring of current conventions (Interview 44).

As one of the strongest proponents of a more normative EU trade policy, the European Parliament generally supports the enlargement of international conventions linked to GSP. According to the Greens Political Adviser, the Parliament is even requesting the extension of positive conditionality for standard GSP (Interview 33). This means that target countries under this label would be obliged to ratify and implement the conventions, like in GSP+, implying that ‘standard GSP would basically disappear’ (Interview 48). Moreover, the Parliament is also requesting that there should be ‘best efforts’ done by EBA countries towards the ratification of the 32 conventions ‘in order to avoid situations like Myanmar’, explains the Greens Political Adviser (Interview 33). Still, views differ from indifference to eagerness on making GSP more conditional. GSP shadow rapporteur Marco Campomenosi, Identity & Democracy member, claims he opposes ‘the political approach of the white men in Europe finger pointing [at] a country regarding a certain level of standards that they should reach in order to have a possibility to trade with me’. For him, he does not believe the EU could export norms without carefully considering the complexity of GSP targets that are ‘very different from each other themselves and from us’ (Interview 43).

Meanwhile, the European People’s Party Political Adviser justifies the conditionalities being asked within the GSP policy due to its nature as a unilateral tool:

If you want to access our market, we have standards. We have values that are fundamental to us and that guides the activities on our market. So, if you want to access our market, this is [sic] some standards and values that you will have to follow in order to comply with what we have created. You’re not obliged to do so. You don’t have to. But if you want to enter the [single] market, if you want to enter the game, then you have to follow some rules. (Interview 34)

That being said, in placing more normative demands on GSP targets, the logical conclusion often culminates in the need for the EU to ‘assist’ the other and provide ‘capacity building’ in this process because targets invariably lack capacity to truly care about fundamental human rights (CS17). Here, the onus is placed on the EU to ‘consider enhancing its support to beneficiary countries as necessary to strengthen their preparedness to respect, protect and fulfil the rights enshrined in the concerned treaties and the related reporting obligations’ (CS13).

Table 3: International conventions in the 2012 and proposed GSP Regulation

‘Shall’ conventions	‘Should’ conventions
<p><i>Human Rights</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1951) 2. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969) 3. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) 4. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) 5. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981) 6. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987) 7. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) <p>*Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court **First and Second Optional Protocols to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (introducing an individual complaint mechanism for breaches of rights under the Convention, and on the abolition of the death penalty respectively)</p> <p><i>Labour Rights</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87) 9. Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98) 10. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) (and its 2014 Protocol) 11. Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) 12. Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) 13. Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) 14. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) 15. Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111) <p>*Convention on Labour Inspection, 1947 (No. 81) *Convention on Tripartite Consultations, 1976 (No. 144)</p>	<p><i>Environmental Protection</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (1973) 17. Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987) 18. Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal (1989) 19. Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) 20. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) 21. Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (2000) 22. Stockholm Convention on persistent Organic Pollutants (2001) 23. Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1998)* <p>*The Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015)</p> <p><i>Good Governance</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 24. United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) 25. United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) 26. United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) 27. United Nations Convention against Corruption <p>*United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2000)</p>

Sources: Annex VIII of Regulation (EU) No. 978/2012, GSP Hub (n.d.), EP19, EP21, and EP22
 *Amendments proposed by the European Commission; Paris Agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol
 **Amendments proposed by the European Parliament

5.4.1 Thou shall readmit your own nationals!

Controversially, the so-called ‘migration paranoia’ in Europe (CS22) has seeped into the reform process of the current GSP. Under the new regulation proposed by the European Commission, Article 19 states that the EU may temporarily withdraw GSP in cases of ‘serious shortcomings [...] related to the obligation to readmit the beneficiary country’s own nationals’ (EC37). Yet the proposed regulation does not include any explicit migration-related international convention in the list of 32 international conventions linked to negative conditionality in the GSP regime. The GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade reasons that, here, the European Commission takes a slightly different approach. The readmission of nationals is not related to any multilateral agreements on migration, but more under international customary law observed by all states. The GSP Policy Officer justifies that the readmissions of nationals feed into the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, namely Goal 10, target 7, on the observance of ‘orderly legal migration’ (Interview 32).

SDGs or no, what the GSP Policy Officer fails to mention here is that returns and readmissions of ‘irregular migrants’ or rejected asylum seekers form part of the European Commission’s wider political process of embedding migration policy into the EU’s broader external relations, including trade (EC46). Moreover, the European Council’s December 2021 conclusions also demand ‘a more unified EU returns policy [...] by using all relevant EU policies, instruments, and tools, including development [and] trade’ (MS3). Indeed, in its mandate for negotiations on the proposed GSP regulation in 2022, the Council urged the Commission to gauge ‘the existence of a serious shortcomings [sic] related to the obligation to readmit the beneficiary country’s national’ (MS2). Although it seems there is no unanimous support in the Council on the migration–GSP nexus (Interviews 55; 61), a trade diplomat from a EuroMed 9 member state cites ‘social pressure’ in pushing them to politically support the readmissions issue (Interview 63). One diplomat from a Three Seas Initiative member state echoes this position even though, for them, migration problems cannot be solved through trade-related schemes, including GSP. Nevertheless, as the EU, ‘we use it. Why? Because this is where our power is’ (Interview 41).

Given this presumed leverage through trade on migration issues, even liberal member states from the New Hanseatic League when it comes to the openness of GSP stand discursively ready to exert negative conditionality on migration issues in GSP. For one trade diplomat, the withdrawal of preferences ‘has to be the stick part of this readmission [although] conditionality can only be used in the case of serious violations’ (Interview 52). According to another trade diplomat, the EU should not shy away from using any leverage at its disposal ‘to make sure that some certain beneficiary countries live up to their obligations, as we see it, to readmit [their] citizens’ (Interview 53). Another trade diplomat recalls that ‘migrants’ were coming from GSP targets through the Belarus–EU border in 2021. The same diplomat thinks that ‘Europe needs a balanced approach in using all leverages it has to work out challenges’ and hastens to add that ‘we need to support [least developed countries], but we need them to be cooperative’. With the ‘right’ trade policy, the diplomat believes that the EU can ‘improve the lives in those countries’ for women, for children, for workers who can expect decent work possible in their own countries. In the context of migration, this is of utmost relevance for the EU in the sense that GSP would encourage some people to want to stay in their countries (Interview 55). What is more, another trade diplomat asks rhetorically: ‘Of course, the motivation is here that if you have a country that refuses to collaborate in some of the key issues with us, why do we then give unilaterally tariff preferences to such a country that does not respect its certain commitments here under international customary law?’ (Interview 30)

Despite this general push to politicise migration in and through trade, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS casts some doubt on the trade–migration link as something that does not cohere well with the Commission’s hitherto approach to negative conditionality around international conventions and hopes that readmissions stay as ‘a dead letter’ in the regulation:

Migrants are a hot topic, but you can ask yourself the question: If I’m Pakistan and I refuse to admit one plane with my own nationals, readmission, 150 people, 200, who am I harming? What does that have to do with sustainable development? Will that help me? Probably rather the contrary because if these 150 nationals stay in Europe, they are sending back money via remittances. And on what basis can you withdraw? ‘cause we withdraw, we saw that in Cambodia, when we withdraw preferences, when we monitor, it should be based on objective criteria, meaning international monitoring bodies, UN reports, special reports. But not just, OK, you didn’t respect our bilateral agreement on readmission, or you didn’t want to conclude a bilateral agreement. So, I think it may be that politically it’s there. Let’s hope it remains a dead letter. (Interview 1)

From a trade and development point of view, the readmissions issue has been discussed extensively as the inclusion of more conditionalities that are less obviously linked to exports could be less WTO-compatible and could discriminate against target countries. Civil society actors even lambast the Commission's move as 'extremely neocolonial', 'illegitimate', and a 'form of blackmail' based on the assumption that the EU opens its markets to GSP targets if and only if they 'take back people who we have deemed not to have the right to asylum' (Interview 60).

This position has become untenable within the European Commission, given the European Council's mandate to integrate migration policy across all policy areas and wider political preferences within the Commission itself to make the trade-migration link much stronger, including by DG Migration and Home Affairs (HOME) and DG Economic and Financial Affairs (ECFIN). According to a policy officer at the European Commission, DG Trade had its arms twisted and DG International Partnerships had to 'stand on the barricades':

DG Trade were really trying to arrive at a compromise and generally they did not want to. I think they at first were relatively sceptical in including these links and really tried to push against it as much as possible. And DG International Partnerships were kind of on that side, too, even though they were not really wanting to stand on the barricades because of the ambiguity of the issue. But I think they more and more realised that taking into account not only other services but especially getting a sense of the political discussions in the Parliament and the Council that we would need some kind of wording on this. (Interview 59)

In contrast to the discursive posture of the Commission and the Council, the European Parliament in general disagrees with the linkage of trade and migration policies. The reaction of my interlocutor from the International Trade Committee, when asked to comment on the readmissions issue, was quite revealing: 'No. [nodding head from side-to-side while smiling] Sorry, I'm not touching that' (Interview 27). Tellingly, the Foreign Affairs Committee and Development Committee as committees for opinion on the GSP policy have deleted the readmissions from the Commission's proposal. However, the International Trade Committee as the forum responsible for GSP on behalf of the European Parliament has only agreed to mention readmissions as a recital, as strategic ambiguity of sorts in making the readmissions issue politically off the regulation and, in a sense, a 'dead letter'. This means that its logic is completely different to that of the Commission proposal. As far as the Parliament is concerned, according to the Greens Political Adviser, 'it cannot be implemented because you don't have anything in the article and it's based

on cooperation’ instead of contractual obligation (Interview 33; see also EP19; EP21). The Greens Political Adviser goes on to say that the readmissions issue actually undermines the Commission’s coherence so far in terms of relying on international conventions to promote values through GSP. On the contrary, one policy officer notes that the Parliament has been ‘very much consistent that we don’t link development policy and migration. So, we don’t make development policy a leverage for forcing countries to cooperate on migration’ and ‘that’s why the trade committee, they don’t want migration to be integrated. We really want to focus on the international conventions, international obligations’ (Interview 48). However, pending the trilogue negotiations on the final compromise around the GSP regulation, a policy officer at the European Commission thinks it would be challenging for the Parliament to defend something very different from the views of the Commission and the Council whose perspectives are relatively close to each other especially on political conditionalities, including on migration (Interview 59).

Others in the European Parliament are more sympathetic with the migration–GSP link. Supporting readmissions in a roundabout way, the European Conservatives & Reformists Political Adviser evades the migration question by referring to one of the International Trade Committee’s shadow rapporteurs on GSP from Spain as a way to perhaps tacitly rationalise why ‘we’ support the readmissions article ‘as a principle’:

He comes from Canarias. And he said, you know, you are maybe from [Western Europe] or [Central Europe], so you don’t realise. But we have all these people coming to Canarias. And these countries like Morocco they are not—of course, Morocco is not in GSP, I think, but maybe others in EBA in Africa, they are not doing this [readmissions obligation]. [...] so, this, as a principle, we wanted in. (Interview 36)

The European People’s Party Political Adviser seems more forthcoming and confides that they wanted to keep the readmissions issue in the regulation and were aligned with the Commission’s proposal. However, compromises had to be made:

Yeah, there is no relevant convention on this. I think that the approach of the Commission was not necessarily the most ideal one. We understand the rationale behind this and the fact that maybe some more efforts should be done in terms of migration. That would benefit both the EU and the beneficiary countries. Some may argue that the GSP is not the best place for it. This is true but then it is a political issue and as soon as the Commission decided to include it in the regulation, it becomes a political issue. And removing it from the regulation is a political act as well. And in that sense, even if we may question the fact that that is not the best place to discuss it and making it a conditionality is not necessarily a good thing, then, the political signal is already there. And we

have to position ourselves according to that, not necessarily according to the substance of the proposal of the Commission. So, because it was in for the EPP, simply agreeing that we should delete it was a bad political signal, because we know that the EPP on migration has a very strong stance. (Interview 34)

The Left Political Adviser states they were against the proposal, which as a ‘red line for us’. Although they say that the compromise in the end was a good one, they are cautious about it given the Council’s political mandate on migration, which is ‘an established position they will not give up so easily’, even more so given the further rise of right-wing governments in the EU, including Sweden and Italy in recent elections. For the Left Political Adviser, ‘I don’t see [the EU] withdrawing preferences because they [the GSP targets] refuse some kind of readmissions. No, it’s more a political point to sell to their public opinion. We are doing our job. We’re defending our borders. That’s the rhetoric of the right wing’ (Interview 64). Even more importantly, for the Left, the real question is how the EU must change the root causes of migration, which have to do with an economic model that is deepening the dependencies between the EU and the global souths. In this view, GSP is not helping target countries get out of poverty (Interview 64).

5.4.2 Thou shall green GSP!

The new GSP proposal demands targets to respect the principles of sustainability conventions, lest their preferences may be withdrawn. The Commission proposal innovates in that it enlarges the list of environmental protection and climate change conventions by adding the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade maintains that the essence of GSP is to facilitate access to EU market and to create jobs that are integrated in global value chains. At the same time, GSP is not only about helping targets trade themselves out of poverty, but to do so now in the name of more ‘sustainability’ to address pressing problems, such as environmental harms as a result of GSP-focused economic activities in third countries and jointly tackling climate change. The new GSP proposal asks the targets of GSP to respect the Paris Agreement as a less controversial topic in the GSP debate (Interview 7; 32). One European Commission policy official says that the EU is pushing the international dimension of the Green Deal through all the different policy tools they have, including GSP, in order ‘to communicate to our partners, whether strategic or not strategic, whenever we have the opportunity, to get them on board on the green agenda’ (Interview 50).

From a climate perspective, another policy official at the European Commission reflects that ‘something has really changed over the last few years with the Green Deal’. They continue, ‘climate policy has become an economic agenda and trade is fully embracing that agenda now’. The speaker, however, makes a conceptual difference between the social and climate norms that the EU is promoting through GSP and to what extent trade can be used as a tool to address them. Social norms are much more open to political interpretation and contestation, whereas climate norms seem much more quantifiable, objective, and, therefore, enforceable:

If you want to address the climate crisis, you have to deal with the fundamentals of economic policy, which are the ways how we produce, what energy we use for the production, how do we move, and how do we eat, how do we plan our space, our soils. So, it’s really at the core of the economic policy. So, in terms of values, I think we are a bit different from the social field, where you have, you know, the criteria on the decent work agenda and [...] the conditions in which the production takes place, whereas when you take climate, again you have another perspective because here the question is more straightforward. It is how much you emit. And this is immediately measurable. [...] In the end, what matters is how much of those gases go in the atmosphere. So, the values are at a different level. (Interview 14)

As the European Green Deal is now in full steam, the imperative of greening GSP has become an unquestioned policy agenda and garnered a wide consensus among EU institutions, member states, civil society, and business on including the Paris Agreement in the GSP regulation (e.g., Interviews 18; 19; 24; 37; 46). Unlike readmissions, one trade diplomat remarks that all EU member states agree with the Commission’s proposal to extend the list of conventions, especially on climate goals, through the Paris Agreement (Interview 55). International trade policy experts in the European business sector support the policy. One expert believes a greener GSP will ‘help the most in need to be able to not only unleash their potential in terms of development, but also in an inclusive and sustainable way’ (Interview 4). Another expert observes that ‘it’s quite a remarkable step forward because if you would have asked me at the beginning of my career here in Brussels, like, seven to eight years ago, I would have probably given you a different answer that time’ (Interview 21), suggesting a U-turn in the general acceptance of pro-climate policies by European businesses. Giving more trade preferences for target countries that respect higher sustainability standards in the way they produce goods is not only compliant with the WTO Enabling Clause but also justified because ‘this is good for their development’ (Interview 15). Swedish Enterprise says

a ‘new GSP Green Deal should be established as a concrete economic incentive to climate action’ (BIZ15).

Yet the green agenda is spooking the markets in some corners, especially those sectors that are already harbouring defensive stances on the openness of the GSP in terms of market access. As a development expert from a European think-tank discerns, there is a perception of an uneven playing field and unfair system where producers in the EU have to comply with higher social and environmental standards, but then ‘cheap imports’ from GSP targets inundate the single market and do not abide by these norms (Interview 15).

Indeed, in line with the idea of a more assertive, geopolitical Commission, the EU is churning out more and more unilateral measures, including on areas like deforestation, due diligence, carbon border adjustment mechanism, and single use plastics (Interviews 37; 49; 54). While these are not the subject of my research as such, it is nonetheless important to contextualise GSP in the broader arsenal of these unilateral measures because they feed into discussions about the need to regulate GSP targets and bring them in line with EU standards, as pointed out by a trade diplomat from a New Hanseatic League member state (Interview 30).

Positioning GSP as something that causes ‘harm’ to EU industry, many representatives of business associations in Brussels bemoan unfair competition with GSP targets and feel that ‘our producers will be struggling when it comes to costs of adapting to the new environment’ (Interview 47; see also BIZ13; BIZ16). Then, some emphasise the need for GSP targets to elevate their rules to protect workers and environment even though ‘the EU industry is willing to sacrifice a little bit of competitiveness, which is a tiny bit, in exchange of a greater benefit for these beneficiary countries’ (Interview 8; see also BIZ7; BIZ14). Other import-competing business interests believe ‘we cannot allow to have a product coming from outside of Europe that do not have such a burden’ (Interview 49) and as such advocate to link GSP with negative conditionality on climate change and environmental protection conventions (BIZ11; BIZ13). Others who complain they are ‘paying the price’ to support GSP targets export-wise and see them ‘growing so much in some sectors’ ask bluntly ‘why are our companies kind of forced to take the burden of these policies’ and why do ‘we allow such a loophole in the GSP’ (Interview 37). Others believe that GSP targets should

follow suit and mimic the example of the EU in ‘being the best in class’ when it comes to the sustainability agenda:

How are we entitled to try to do that? Who gives us the right to do that? I don’t know. I have heard from maybe personal interactions that some may perceive this as a new way of imposing something on others and that it might not be welcome. But then, at the same time, we have seen in Europe growth and development and peace and, you know, we are always trying to be the best in the class. When it comes to trade, sometimes we want to be also the best in class and have more open markets. When it comes to environmental ambitions, we have the emission trading scheme. Now we want to have a carbon border adjustment mechanism. We just want to force the others to curb their emissions and make sure that everybody is contributing to learn how to reduce emissions around the globe. So, yes, Europe is doing that in a sense. (Interview 20)

For civil society actors in Brussels, the Green Deal poses existential threats for GSP exporters who ‘can’t live up’ to what the EU sees as prescribed green practices: ‘I have no idea how soon these countries are going to be able to put their stuff on the market. I mean the Green Deal is basically going to kill some of the upcoming economies’ (Interview 12). Similarly, on the agenda of the French Presidency to introduce ‘mirror clauses’ in trade policy discussions, a trade policy expert at a Brussels-based non-profit organisation admits that they are:

quite worried about the concept of mirror clauses, which again reflects as an idea of: we do everything best in Europe. I mean the term mirror, which came from the French presidency, but was picked up to a certain extent by the Commission, the idea of that is, we want you to mirror our actions with the underlying presumption that our actions are things that should be mirrored. Now, if you look at that in an African context, what you see in the EU is massive industrial agriculture, massive use of pesticides, fertilisers. You don’t have that in African countries. In African countries, you have extremely low use of pesticides. Now, the EU uses certain pesticides and if they were to say to African farmers, you have to use exactly the same, you have to mirror our practices. It doesn’t take into account that the climatic environmental conditions in African countries are not the same as in Europe. So, telling producers in those countries to do exactly the same, as they’re doing in Europe, it’s a little bit foolish [laughing] you could argue. But what we thought was interesting in the whole discussion was the underlying assumption that Europe is the best in the world. And you should be copying us. (Interview 54)

Here, the speaker emphasises that the French notion of ‘mirror clauses’ and its potential application to GSP would depart markedly from the notion of ‘differentiated responsibility’ when it comes to fighting climate change. The trade policy expert, then, goes on to say that it is past time ‘to step away from thinking of the EU as the norm-giver. We have to be thinking of the EU as part of a situation to which they have largely contributed’ (Interview 54).

All things said, dumping ‘green’ conditionalities on GSP targets is widely considered to be aligned with the spirit of the Green Deal and the ambition to make the EU’s trade agenda more sustainable. In the context of GSP, this agenda ultimately necessitates, once again, calls on Brussels to provide aid and capacity building to ‘elevate’ sustainability standards and practices in the global souths to ‘match’ those of the EU (CS12).

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have generated a thick description of GSP in line with wider methodological efforts to break with positivism and instead embrace interpretivism in the critical study of EU policies, particularly trade (Bollen 2018). Relying on ethnographic data generated with EU trade policy elites in Brussels and intertextually read with policy documents, I have *explicated the official discourse of international partnerships through GSP and its political significance as interpreted by policy elites across various sites of power: European Commission, European Parliament, EU member states, civil society, and business.*

For the EU, the overarching rationale of GSP remains unchanged: to enable the global souths to grow more and better through sustainable trade, thereby claiming to elevate millions out of poverty globally. Within GSP, the global souths are pushed to graduate up and out the scheme until they become ‘mature enough’ to conclude more demanding free trade agreements with the EU. Key to the idea of graduation is how the EU differentiates between GSP targets and their (in)capacity to assume the political demands of maintaining normative trade ties with Brussels. By offering more market access concessions, the EU believes it holds the strongest leverage over ‘vulnerable’ countries that sign up to the GSP+ scheme. The perverse idea, here, is that without these additional enticements, GSP+ targets would remain *immobile* when it comes to their ‘hard’ obligations to the international order. To the ‘most in need’ countries, the EU offers the most preferential treatment by tearing all tariffs and quotas down in their favour, except on weapons. No strict legal obligations are placed upon them given their already marginalised position at the bottom of the global economic order. As for ‘more advanced developing’ countries under the standard GSP, the idea is for them to move up the ladder and level up to GSP+ or a free trade agreement, should the conditions be deemed finally ‘right’ for them. In all cases, the general posture is that the EU must

incite more and more GSP targets to accede to the GSP+ scheme. Ultimately, this means more EU power, more EU control, more EU leverage over others.

As the interview excerpts prefacing this chapter and the next one both suggest, one development policy expert and one political adviser from the European Parliament insist that nothing about the GSP is colonial or neocolonial since the EU is ‘setting’, ‘influencing’, and ‘exporting’ international norms (Interview 15) and because the GSP exists not ‘for us’ meaning the EU but ‘for them’ meaning the global souths (Interview 36). The EU gets away with using its market power to leverage GSP and demand political concessions from less powerful GSP targets because it insists Brussels is promoting internationally agreed conventions, not norms, rules, or standards concocted in the EU. This discursive framing is central to growing political demands in the EU to make GSP more normative by asking GSP+ targets, if not all GSP targets, to be answerable to the EU on their respect of more and more international conventions. Binding GSP to international norms paints a different picture of the EU’s attempt to exert power externally because popular and even scholarly criticisms sometimes argue that the EU is bluntly exporting ‘EU norms’ within asymmetric relations of power with the global souths. In this sense, coloniality exposes these subtle discursive differences and, as such, lends itself well to scrutinising the nuanced context of GSP. Simply because the EU is avowed to espousing international norms instead of EU ones does not exempt it from decolonial critique, even more so since this normative activism is depoliticised as ‘trade partnerships’.

This partnership discourse is undermined by how the EU leverages GSP to justify placing not only parochial but ethically questionable obligations upon GSP targets, as we have seen in the ‘migration paranoia’ to politicise asylum issues via GSP and ‘Green Deal’ politics intent on effectively asking GSP targets to ‘mirror’ practices on the common market as the exemplary behaviour to mimic, emulate or follow. Crucially, imposing more political demands such as these regresses into further calls to exert more power by providing aid, technical assistance, capacity building, and the like.

Despite competing interpretations around GSP as a market access device, it is intersubjectively shared, in the EU trade policymaking community, that the global souths are gasping for EU

presence for them to achieve more, become better, and face the realities of 21st century trade. This community of interpreters may harbour differences about the procedural content as to how to regulate GSP better, more effectively, more coherently, more inclusively. But the substantive content of discourse remains unswerving: the need for EU intervention. Put crudely, GSP targets *need* the EU every which way—propelling the cycle of dependencies again and again.

Within this so-called ‘partnership’, the EU emphasises the obligations of GSP targets to act and ‘behave’ in terms of respecting international norms. As partners, GSP ‘beneficiaries’ must strive to fulfil their international obligations and cooperate with the EU through ‘better monitoring’, ‘enhanced engagement’, and ‘political dialogue’ in shared pursuits of propagating sustainable development and boosting the public acceptance of trade in Europe. Otherwise, the preferential market access privileges of norm-breaking targets may be withdrawn ‘as a last resort’.

6. ‘You won’t kill the fishermen, even if they’ve done something wrong’: The (geo)politics of EU intervention through GSP

Antonio: Some would say GSP is a neocolonialist tool for all the reasons we talked about—about values and norms promotion and whatever. What’s your take on that?

European Conservatives & Reformists Political Adviser: Never heard! Neocolonialism. Never heard in this discussion. Nothing. Never heard, never heard, never heard, never heard. It’s more about for whom we do the tool: for us or for them? I’ve not heard neocolonialism. (Interview 36)

6.1 Introduction

So far, I have explicated the scholarly and historical discourses on GSP and how they constitute the global souths as entities to be ordered and governed through trade. To challenge the discourses of global governance through trade and interdependence with the Third World, I have argued that such discourses subordinate the global souths through logics of Eurocentric knowledge production and maintaining hierarchical economic relationships. In the previous chapter, I have generated a ‘thicker’ account of GSP by showing how EU trade policy elites interpret GSP relations through a discourse of partnerships. This chapter unsettles this partnership discourse by uncovering how the EU increasingly asserts interventionist logics in the context of GSP monitoring missions and withdrawals. That is, how the EU discursively uses market access for political ends by justifying its policing of the political performance of GSP targets on a wide array of international conventions on human rights, labour rights, good governance, climate, and the environment. By analytically employing the logic of intervention *through* trade, I turn to scrutinising how the (geo)politics of asserting a more normative trade policy discursively unfolds through GSP.

While foreign policy and political economy analyses tend to take for granted how the EU leverages market access to influence politics elsewhere (e.g., Portela 2010; Damro 2012; Portela and Orbie 2014; Damro 2015; Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Poletti and Sicurelli 2022), I interrogate the underlying assumptions of the EU’s power over its presumed ‘others’ in world politics by means of the GSP regime. In doing so and given my decolonial epistemic location, I implicate the notion of intervention through GSP as ‘a colonial-modern technology at its point of departure, specifically, one that erects and polices the difference between sovereign and quasi-sovereign

entities via a standard of civilisation’ (Shilliam 2013, 1133). The centrality of development promotion to GSP relations authorises the EU to intervene in the ‘developing’ world not only by instigating greater global trade integration but also inculcating international norms in ‘vulnerable’ and ‘most in need’ countries (Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Yet this line of critique has yet to uncover empirically how official EU discourse has increasingly pushed GSP into the realm of interventionist logics, well beyond the conventional and historical accent on market access issues prior to the Treaty of Lisbon. By showing how the logic of intervention operates through EU GSP discourses, I hope to open up new lines of critique that would interrogate GSP as intervention *through* trade based on a ‘colonial relation of international power’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 8). That is to say, GSP targets invariably owe their social and political betterment and their ability to solve governance problems through the intervention regimes of a normative power that is the EU. The language of ‘monitoring missions’ and ‘enhanced engagement’ subordinates GSP targets into relations of power that enable the EU to ‘missioneer’, scrutinise, judge, and legislate on the governance performance of/in GSP targets on a wide array of international conventions in exchange for more market access. By making the interventionist logics of GSP legible, I want to make a case for alternative interpretations, in future research, of the phenomenon of intervention *through* trade and how it operates in practice from the historical conditions, experiences, and knowledges of GSP targets themselves (cf. Sabaratnam 2017).

Drawing on 65 semi-structured interviews with trade policy elites in Brussels (see Annex A), this chapter works through a critical interpretation of how GSP-dependent countries in the global souths are discursively subjected to increasingly interventionist logics by the EU. To this end, the rest of the chapter unfolds in four parts. First, I discern how EU trade policy elites justify the imperative of *intervening* in the global souths to help them aspire towards sustainable development through trade. Second, I contradict the official, stable account of GSP as a mode of partnership, cooperation, and dialogue by demonstrating how it is undermined by logics of ‘tutelage’ and ‘control’ in the programming of intervention, even in the discourse of progressive EU political and civil society actors. Third, I interrogate how the EU’s language of GSP withdrawals in case, for the EU, intervention fails to affect change in the target countries ultimately centres the EU’s (geo)political considerations and orientates the political realities of GSP targets around those of the intervener. Last but not least, I end the chapter by pointing to the discursive closure of

contemporary GSP relations and the imperative of pushing the critique of EU trade policy further by scrutinising how interventionist logics unfold in practice in particular GSP contexts.

6.2 GSP+ and the imperative of intervention

Discursively, the EU leverages GSP as a means of inculcating the respect of international norms in countries categorised as ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’. Through mechanisms of political conditionality, the EU obliges ‘vulnerable’ target countries to ratify and implement 27 internationally agreed conventions on core human rights and labour standards as well as principles on the environment and good governance (see Table 3). This applies particularly to the GSP+ sub-scheme where target countries receive more market access to the EU, should they commit to these conventions in a legally binding manner. In this sense, the Greens Political Adviser enthuses that ‘the power of the GSP is that you have the conventions. So, you have the international standards. So, you really have the possibility to support the countries in meeting those international standards’ (Interview 33).

To exercise this presumed power, the current GSP Regulation of 2012–23 mandates the European Commission to monitor GSP+ countries. Article 13 stipulates:

As of the date of the granting of the tariff preferences provided under the special incentive arrangement for sustainable development and good governance, the Commission shall keep under review the status of ratification of the relevant conventions and shall monitor their effective implementation, as well as cooperation with the relevant monitoring bodies, by examining the conclusions and recommendations of those monitoring bodies. (LEX2)

On this basis, the logic is that it is incumbent upon the EU to intervene in ‘vulnerable’ countries to aid them in working towards sustainable development through trade. The logic of intervention manifests itself in the discourse around monitoring GSP targets. To police international conventions, EU intervention is made necessary by way of monitoring missions to target countries in order to engage in ‘dialogue’ at the levels of governments, NGOs, businesses, workers, UN monitoring bodies, and civil society organisations. To be clear, this ‘missionneering’ is reserved for what the European Commission and the EEAS are doing in the context of GSP+ whereas the European Parliament is also sending delegations or fact-finding missions to GSP targets (Interview

56), which sit outside the empirical scope of this dissertation and equally demand interpretive scrutiny in future.

The GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade states that monitoring GSP targets ‘helps trigger important processes of changes, which otherwise would simply not start’ (Interview 32). Here, the implicit meaning is that socio-political transformations in the contexts of the global souths would not materialise without EU presence. That the global souths would be inert to trigger transformative change *by themselves for themselves* without the market access inducements dangled through GSP. Reinforcing the necessity of EU intervention, the Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade, presumably triggered by my social location, singles out as an example the Philippines and underlines that the civil society actors in target countries are enabled to exert their agency *through the EU, through monitoring missions*:

If we’re not there and GSP+ did not exist, for example, I wouldn’t be going to Philippines to discuss labour rights. Nobody would. So, they know that. So, the NGOs and trade unions say, we appreciate this programme exists because it gives YOU the right to come here and talk to me, and not talk to the government. So, they appreciate this, this bridge, this platform, which allows them through us, to express their views. (Interview 42)

By intervening, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS elaborates that the most important role of monitoring missions is that they bring countries to the table, including ministries and subnational governments, to discuss serious issues on human rights and labour rights. Implying the EU’s leverage over them, the Co-Father adds that the target countries know that ‘they have to improve their track record’ and ‘progress towards full implementation of the conventions’ (Interview 1). For some trade diplomats from the Visegrád Group, monitoring missions are a means of ensuring ‘how to make beneficiaries more responsible in fulfilling their commitments’ (Interview 29) and knowing that GSP targets are ‘in line with our principles’ in terms of human rights and democratic freedoms (Interview 23).

Informally, a GSP team at DG Trade is in charge of monitoring GSP targets (Interview 7). However, the programming of intervention is not inscribed in the GSP policy per se. Rather, it has emerged in an arbitrary manner since the introduction of the current GSP regulation in 2012. The Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade recounts the notion of monitoring missions, which did not exist

before 2012, has been ‘practically developed from scratch’ in order to enhance the sustainable development angle of GSP in terms of ‘how we interpret the rules, how we enforce the rules, and how we communicate and engage with the beneficiaries’. Over the past years, the intervener has presumably sought to ‘change GSP radically for the better’ and to push for reforms in target countries through monitoring missions (Interview 42).

Without changing the text of the GSP regulation, DG Trade has worked to change ‘the administrative practice on how we were meant to implement [GSP]’ (Interview 42). Indeed, Article 13 of the GSP regulation does not specify *how* the European Commission is meant to monitor GSP+ countries. It simply states that the Commission will have to monitor every two years and write a report that considers the recommendations and reports of international monitoring bodies of the relevant GSP+ conventions (LEX2). The Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade, however, recalls an anecdote about a colleague telling him that his job should be an easy one when he joined the Commission:

Somebody told me, Oh, you’ve got a very easy job, Bonifacio [a pseudonym], because he says, you know, every two years, just go to the UN. See what they say. You copy-paste. You publish it together. That’s it. Your job is done. But that’s not the way we looked at it at the time. And we said, no, no, *the law must have some meaning*. You know *this was an opportunity for the EU to really push the sustainable development agenda*. So, simply copy-pasting international monitoring reports is not good enough, because you know they do what they have to do. But the point is, where do we add value as a trade tool? So, the question is how do you do it? (Interview 42; emphasis added)

The Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade continues:

The idea of a GSP+ monitoring visit did not exist. There’s nowhere [in the policy] that says that you should visit the country and monitor. But it looked obvious to us, you know. I did a very first monitoring visit in Pakistan. It was spring 2014 so only five months into the new regulation. And we had a bilateral dialogue on trade. We thought, we’re going to Islamabad to discuss about trade but since now they are members of GSP+, you know, why not take the opportunity to add, you know, another point of the agenda? You know, now, that you’re a GSP+, what do you plan to do? And then we started like that. You know, as a bilateral trade dialogue. (Interview 42)

Led by DG Trade, monitoring missions to GSP+ countries draw on the central services of the European Commission, especially EEAS and DG Employment. DG International Partnerships is less involved in monitoring missions and more assuming the role of facilitating rollover or making

sure that DG Trade as *chef de file* has access to all the necessary inputs from EU delegations globally that typically lead the policy dialogues with the partner governments in question (Interview 6). In the field, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS divulges that EU monitoring missions:

tend to always leave behind what I call my famous or infamous list of 10 action items, well, whenever we have a monitoring mission. Our monitoring missions should not be a human rights dialogue 2.0, with all the issues. We focus on a number of I'd say most important issues, not saying that the others are not important but those that are very important if a country wants to keep on enjoying its GSP benefits. (Interview 1)

Monitoring missions are supposedly distinct from a human rights dialogue, which serves as 'a dialogue between, in many ways, equal partners'. The Co-Father of GSP at EEAS reasons that the EU and GSP targets are deemed 'also equal but one partner comes up with a trade benefit and requests the other partner to perform on human rights, labour rights, environment, and good governance' (Interview 1).

Importantly, despite framing this encounter as equal between two partners, the intended meaning points to the fact that the EU as the intervener unilaterally offers market access and imposes conditions upon the intervened before such market access is granted. In other words, representational and material inequalities characterise the GSP+ relationship. Subjected to monitoring missions, GSP+ targets are constituted as laggards on international norms and unconditionally in need of external assistance from a more normative and materially capable EU. This is, of course, not to say that the EU does not have problems of its own in the conduct of GSP. Whereas GSP+ countries should solve more substantive issues around fundamental human and labour rights, the EU's problems ostensibly revolve around procedural issues. Resource constraints prevent DG Environment from participating fully in monitoring missions in spite of the greater emphasis on 'greening' GSP (Interview 50). Similarly, resource limitations mean EU missions cannot realistically monitor 'every day all the time' the performance of different countries on 27 conventions—much to the dismay of EU parliamentarians who wish to push monitoring to 'a kind of extreme level' (Interview 59). Because of this, effective monitoring seems ever elusive. As such, monitoring missions are forced to prioritise 'what interventions we have at the moment that are really supporting, improving the situations in those areas like child labour, or a certain ILO convention, or biodiversity convention' (Interview 6). Last but not least, transparency is another

key procedural issue levelled against the intervener. The Commission does not follow a monitoring procedure that is open and transparent especially when they report to the Parliament on the monitoring missions but in camera (Interview 43). The Commission must make public the plan of action by GSP+ targets on meeting their commitments to create another layer of leverage according to Human Rights Watch (Interview 45). To further promote transparency, the intervener should strengthen ‘engagement with civil society in order to create leverage internally so that these conventions are better implemented with workers or civil society’ (Interview 13).

6.3 Sub(-)versions of GSP

In this section, I discuss how the official EU discourse of partnership within GSP monitoring missions is subverted by the ways in which EU-centred progressive civil society and political voices criticise the procedural shortcomings of the official programming of intervention through trade without substantively questioning the hierarchical relations of power between the EU and the global souths. Instead, they discursively reproduce the need for the EU to exert more control and more power to inculcate change in GSP targets by exerting the leverage the EU is deemed to possess through trade. At the same time, I scrutinise ‘enhanced engagement’ as a specific sub-version of GSP to generate an alternative account of intervention through trade outside, or underneath, the formal GSP+ monitoring missions. In both instances, the discourses of so-called progressive actors ‘reflect a pedagogical strategy where subjects of intervention are considered under tutelage from the “technicians” of the mission’ (Jeandesboz 2015, 449).

6.3.1 Subversions by progressive EU voices

Political and civil society actors in the EU contradict the programming of GSP+ monitoring missions due to their arbitrariness and lack of transparency. A development policy expert exerts that ‘what is needed for the partner countries is to have greater clarity of when they will be or what will trigger them to be the target of European investigation, and what could be the outcomes and why’ (Interview 15). Similarly, a business and human rights expert says that monitoring missions need to be more targeted by establishing clear benchmarks and timelines of tangible goals set against ‘scorecards’ so that ‘it becomes clear for the beneficiary countries as well what is expected from them’. In this way, the same expert adds that monitoring would avoid ‘any ad hoc measures

taken by the Commission, which at the same time also hurt workers in these beneficiary countries' (Interview 12). A human rights advocate believes that making these benchmarks public would help galvanise action around changes that the EU would like to see taking place in GSP targets:

If the EU goes to Country X and says, after all the meetings in the context of the GSP+, we call on the country to improve its human rights record. What does that mean? What are you talking about? Which law? Which individual? Which policies, et cetera? If the EU goes out and says, we want to see this law repealed. We want to see this reform go on respecting these and these standards. We want to see these and these individuals out of jail, et cetera. Then, the media, the politicians in the country, the trade community, the business community et cetera will know what those benchmarks are, where the attention needs to be. And so, that may help for the government to deliver, or the parliament, depending on what kind of system there is. And that has ostensibly not been the case. So, that's something that we are calling for. (Interview 45)

Under a more transparent interventionist regime, civil society actors in GSP targets would be 'legitimised' as a 'partner' in monitoring missions as 'they could assist their governments in attaining the goals set out in a road map that is part of EBA or GSP+ implementation' (Interview 12). Formally engaging civil society actors in target countries, a business and human rights expert says, should be an integral component of EU intervention, not least by allowing them to trigger the withdrawal of GSP and escalate cases of 'serious and systematic' violations of international norms to the EU's Chief and Trade Enforcement Officer. Nevertheless, this is deemed challenging because, from the intervener's point of view, civil society actors in the global souths often 'do not have the knowledge of EU, do not have the resources and the means to engage, to have the ears of the EU, and to be able to trigger the mechanism there, and to be able to see their concerns thoroughly reflected into the assessment that the Commission makes' (Interview 45).

Linked to this, the programming of intervention in the context of GSP+ is subverted by critics as it limits who can and who cannot leverage the Single-Entry Point. The Single-Entry Point is a dedicated team within the European Commission's DG Trade, under the leadership of the Chief Trade Enforcement Officer. It is the first port of call for all EU actors who are facing potential trade barriers in third countries or who find non-compliance with sustainability rules related to GSP or the trade and sustainable development chapters in free trade agreements (EC45). Under the current GSP regulation, the complaints mechanism is limited and often bypasses the role of civil society both in the EU and target countries to monitor the respect of international conventions (Interview 38). For this reason, the Greens Political Adviser emphasises that the European

Parliament has advocated for the establishment of a plan of action by GSP+ countries within the newly proposed EU GSP regulation. Under this proposal, civil society actors in third countries must be consulted in the framework of GSP+ plan of action and should be empowered to access the Single Entry Point, which is currently not the case (Interview 33).

Demonstrating how the sidestepping of civil society has undermined GSP+ monitoring, an industriALL official recounts the context of Guatemala as ‘a very dangerous country for labour rights activists, human rights activists, and trade unionists’. In 2010–11, industriALL put to the test what demonstrating ‘serious and systematic’ violations of international conventions might mean in practice for the international trade union movement in order to trigger the withdrawal process against Guatemala as a GSP+ target. Informally, the European Commission told industriALL that a special paragraph on Guatemala at the annual International Labour Conference would be required. Securing a special paragraph at the Conference is a tedious process and demands the agreement between workers, employers, and governments at the ILO in Geneva. After securing such a wording, industriALL reverted to the Commission only to be told that a second special paragraph from the Conference would be needed. In the face of this additional documentation, DG Trade said this sufficed as proof that there was a ‘serious’ violation of fundamental rights in Guatemala but then told industriALL that another special paragraph would be needed to establish ‘systematic’ violation. Despite procuring another paragraph in this regard, DG Trade waved the evidence away and argued ‘well, it’s up to us how we deal with it anyway’. Much to industriALL’s dismay:

Guatemala will progress from GSP+ into the Central America free trade agreement, of which there is no monitoring or implementation in terms of trade and sustainable development commitments and, therefore, it’s too late to do anything. And this was so frustrating as an example of how bad the system worked [...] and then very, very fluid definitions of what the kind of reference points of the legislation mean the moving of goal posts all of the time, depending on politics. (Interview 60)

To no avail, industriALL advocated for a delegated act that would clearly outline the specific criteria that civil society had to meet in order to demonstrate ‘serious and systematic’ violations and infringements of fundamental international conventions. However, the Commission

consistently opposed this proposal, effectively rendering GSP ‘toothless’ according to an industriALL official (Interview 60).

Third, ‘progressive’ voices in the EU subvert the programming of GSP+ monitoring missions because they have so far excluded the critical role that EU and ‘local’ trade unions could play in monitoring violations of international conventions. The Left Political Adviser maintains that the involvement of independent trade unions would create ‘more pressure’ on the governments of GSP+ countries and would counterbalance the type of policy communities that the EU has so far engaged more prominently, such as business associations (Interviews 18; 64). According to a political adviser at the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the GSP+ monitoring regime should be a conduit for a more structured involvement of trade unions in GSP+ targets in view of improving working conditions in line with various ILO conventions attached to GSP+ conditionality. For European trade unionists, ‘sometimes we hear complaints from our colleagues on the ground and they say that when they talk to their government, they don’t listen to them. And the EU doesn’t listen to them either. So, in the end, it’s an instrument for businesses’. For ETUC, the absence of trade unions from the programming of intervention has subverted the official account of EU monitoring missions in terms of effectively delivering on labour rights in GSP+ targets (Interview 3).

Last but not least, consider how one civil society organiser subverts the interventionist logics inscribed into GSP relations as an ‘uneven relationship’ or a ‘continuation of colonial policy’ via the WTO by preserving EU economic interests and obligating GSP targets to uplift their labour conditions in order to ‘level the playing field’ vis-à-vis labour standards in the EU:

Antonio: Let’s talk more about the EU and its role in economic globalisation more broadly and how the GSP is implicated in that. What would be your view on the GSP’s role in integrating the least integrated economies into global value—

Civil society organiser: I mean one of the three points that GSP is supposed to do is just for the economic interests of the EU. It’s clear. Everybody knows this. I mean it’s-it’s-it’s-it’s on the DG Trade website. [laughing] It says sustainable development blah-blah- blah. But we’re also in here just to further EU interest. Clearly, there’s no doubt about it. So, that’s why we—that’s why I was saying we need to get a more balanced relationship ‘cause otherwise it’s still just—I mean WTO policy is just an extension of colonial policy in the past. I mean let’s just be honest about it.

Antonio: Would you say the same about the GSP?

Civil society organiser: I mean it's touching on it. I mean ISDS [Investor–State Dispute Settlement] clearly was one. I mean ISDS was created when the European countries lost their colonies. And they just wanted to protect their-their-their-their investments that they made, which weren't really their investments but whatever. I don't think a lot of people are aware of this. We talk about trade policy but there is clearly this uneven relationship where I mean we're fine with one-euro T-shirts being produced in Bangladesh, which is absurd obviously. So, at the same time the force field you're operating in when it comes to trade policy is, on the one hand, you're trying to ensure that we have production capacities in the EU with labour rights that are respected. On the other hand, we have people working in some cases semi-slavery conditions against wages that are below a living wage. Extracting these goods. [laughing] Sending these goods to the EU, while at the same time requiring these beneficiary countries or trade partner countries to uplift the labour standards to ensure that we have a level playing field. It's-it's-it's very messy. It's— There's not— It's very messy. It's very complicated. So, again, how can you improve certain standards in a trade partner country, but at the same time not hurt the local population, which I think is also part of discussion. But then the EU, as a whole, needs to start operating in a different way. I mean how are you gonna convince Duterte to do things differently? How are you going to convince the leadership in Myanmar to operate in a different way? You need to have a broader toolbox to be able to deal with all that as well. (Interview 12)

I cite this conversation at length here to show that, despite recognising the 'colonial' and 'uneven' relations of power present within GSP, civil society reverts back to the familiar 'toolbox' thinking of 'doing things differently' but procedurally staying within the same frame of reference. That is, the imperative of bettering the GSP's mechanism of leverage and power over others since political problems elsewhere are discursively rendered *solvable* through EU presence and intervention.

6.3.2 Enhanced engagement as sub-version

In this section, I explicate how the language of 'enhanced engagement' operates as a sub-version of EU intervention through trade 'underneath' the official GSP+ intervention steered by the so-called *trias politica*: DG Trade, DG Employment, and EEAS. Underpinned by a paternalising rationale, this sub-version of GSP+ concerns certain target countries considered 'problematic' under the Everything but Arms regime. Informally, enhanced engagement exists as a substratum of intervention through trade in the context of EBA countries where, unlike GSP+, there is no formal monitoring as stipulated in the regulation (Interview 45). For the Greens Political Adviser, the fact that the European Commission has unofficially established enhanced engagement is a recognition that EBA countries 'need' stricter monitoring for them to deliver on respecting international conventions (Interview 33).

At present, enhanced engagement is not a codified mechanism and gives the Commission more leeway to enter into a ‘political dialogue’ with EBA targets as opposed to the GSP+ monitoring where a complex set of policy actors are mobilised across governance levels, including but not limited to UN and ILO monitoring bodies, EU institutions, government offices in the target country, civil society, and industry (Interview 29). In other words, enhanced engagement is not inscribed into the official GSP regulation as such. As the International Trade Committee Political Adviser at the European Parliament puts it: ‘enhanced engagement, which doesn’t exist on paper, is something the Commission came up with to try and increase the leverage that the system has’ (Interview 27).

A trade diplomat from the Benelux group reflects that the EU decides to enhance its engagement with certain EBA targets ‘if the situation is really deteriorating or really bad or even in some countries whose situation is quite good but there are some improvements to be made’ (Interview 24). For a EuroMed 9 trade diplomat, enhanced engagement is ‘about having partners who want to do more, you know, who are not static within the basic requirements of the regulation but they are willing to do more notably on the issues of women’s rights, labour rights, political rights, death penalty, environmental issues, et cetera’ (Interview 11). Meanwhile, the Left Political Adviser says that enhanced engagement means that the European Commission ‘should pressure more. That’s what they want to say in a polite way probably, you know. They are criticised because of inaction, and this is the answer’ (Interview 18).

From the European Commission’s perspective, enhanced engagement works as ‘a kind of deepened monitoring of EBA countries’ without the legally binding GSP+ conditions on market access and obligations to ratify and implement international conventions (Interview 6). It is seen as a ‘problem-solving’ approach in the context of EBA countries that flout international norms on human rights and labour standards (Interview 0). Enhanced engagement is about detecting and resolving problems under the GSP regulation. In this case, the GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade says there is a need to intensify engagement with trading counterparts, meaning primarily with governments in target countries, but also separately with civil society, trade unions, and NGOs to ‘collect intelligence’ that the EU would not otherwise acquire from government sources. When

there are problems with the obligations of target countries to comply with international conventions, the EU signals to countries that necessary steps must be taken. The GSP Policy Officer states ‘with privileges come responsibilities’. For the GSP to work, there has to be ‘willingness of the other parties to engage more’ (Interview 7).

Under enhanced engagement, EBA targets—Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar—have been singled out and made subject to more intensified monitoring. Why only three out of 50+ EBA countries? The Co-Father of GSP at EEAS reasons that in these cases the EU possesses leverage due to these three countries’ highly articulated levels of trade exposure to the EU market, hovering between 90–95% of all EBA exports (Interview 1). The EU’s ‘cooperative’ approach to engaging with target countries handicapped by ‘limited expertise’ has supposedly enabled reforms and capacity-building efforts to take place, such as in the case of Cambodia prior to the partial withdrawal of its preferences in 2020 (Interview 9). Similarly, the GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade believes that Bangladesh has been a success story of enhanced engagement because it has managed to make the most out of international trade under EBA, especially in the reforms that the EU deemed necessary in the garments and textiles sector following the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in 2013 (Interview 32). In this context, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS clarifies that enhanced engagement means ‘we are getting closer to what would be a normal monitoring process for the GSP+ countries’. He adds:

With the enhanced engagement, we’re trying to bring a bit more structure in the process so that we don’t overreact when, I think, the Parliament gets worried or there are outcries by civil society. We want a more structured process. I think that’s the main advantage of enhanced engagement. (Interview 1)

For this reason, more and more voices in the European Parliament are calling to formalise the enhanced engagement because it is unclear what it means and when and how this practice unfolds. As remarked by a sustainability officer, it is for now hinging on ‘very political decisions’ based on what is happening in a given EBA country and the market power that the EU has over that country (Interview 19). The Greens Political Adviser stresses the necessity of enhanced engagement, despite its limits, in instigating social and political changes in EBA countries where otherwise the EU is not obliged to intervene through official monitoring missions:

In the case of Cambodia, it has not worked. In the case of Myanmar, it has not worked. In the case of Bangladesh, we don't know. [laughing] So, no, the glasses are half-empty, maybe. In the case of Bangladesh, now, we have had this labour road map since last summer, which is the result of the enhanced engagement after all. Then, we don't have to forget that issues have been there since Rana Plaza and that there was a sustainability compact, you know. And we are still discussing about the same issues. So, no real substantial progress. But we do believe that the enhanced engagement is a necessary process because I mean in a way in the GSP+ you have the formal monitoring. For the EBA, you have nothing formally. There is no formal monitoring. (Interview 33)

For the European People's Party Political Adviser, it is ideal to formalise enhanced engagement because it aims at improving political dialogue between the EU and GSP target countries. However, they stress that the EU must be prepared to act when it is time to act, i.e., when political dialogue fails, and the withdrawal of preferences must be eventually triggered as a last resort (Interview 34).

Then, enhanced engagement serves as 'an intermediary step, if you will, before withdrawal' (Interview 45). For a policy official at the European Commission, it is a way for the EU to label the state of political relations it has with certain EBA countries. As a fig leaf to the more overtly paternalistic language of 'scorecarding', enhanced engagement subtly suggests that the EU and concerned target countries are in an advanced stage of political discussions 'before triggering other types of measures that the EU may have that the third partner countries are aware of. It's a way of waving the flag before the EU needs to go to more dire measures' (Interview 13).

That said, a trade diplomat from the New Hanseatic League affirms that a broad consensus exists among the member states and the Commission that this withdrawal of GSP benefits is 'truly a last resort' measure. This is due to beliefs in Brussels that the EU loses leverage once it withdraws the benefits and that Brussels presumably commands more influence and leverage over GSP targets prior to the withdrawal of preferences. This perceived or real leverage lies in 'all the process of dialogue, trying to convince our partners that they should do things differently' (Interview 30).

Overall, as the International Trade Committee Political Adviser at the European Parliament puts it, intervening in 'problematic' EBA targets through enhanced engagement is a way to appease all actors involved, including the EEAS, which normally prefers a dialogical approach to external relations, and to the trade and development side, which prefers to see that the EU is actively

pursuing perceived violations of international norms. Intervention in EBA countries represents ‘as much a signal internally as externally to other countries as giving them one last chance before we initiate procedures for temporary withdrawal of preferences’ (Interview 27).

6.4 When ‘missioneering’ fails: GSP withdrawals as coercion?

Despite coming across as a very technocratic-sounding and innocent policy, GSP bodes significant political consequences, especially if the EU threatens or decides to suspend trade preferences from certain norm-breaking GSP targets. In this section, I discuss the discursive content of today’s EU trade policy that claims to be assertive, not least terms of the language of withdrawing GSP as a last resort if the EU deems that its efforts at sending monitoring missions to dialogue and engage fail to inculcate change in the global souths (EC29; EC30; EC31; EC37; EP19). To this end, I make two analytical moves. On the one hand, I draw attention to the reproduction of unequal power relations between the EU and the GSP targets in the context of GSP withdrawals. On the other hand, I interrogate how the language of withdrawing GSP centres the (geo)political considerations of the intervener and orientates the political realities of GSP targets around those of the EU-self.

6.4.1 Reifying unequal power hierarchies through GSP withdrawals

The withdrawal of preferences is often seen by trade diplomats as a mechanism of ‘pushing countries to implement GSP+ conventions’ (Interview 55), ‘changing their behaviour’ (Interview 44), and ‘teaching these countries how to do it in a more principled, more value-based way’ (Interview 41). These framings naturalise the representational and material inequalities between the EU as a normative global actor and the GSP targets as norm-breakers, as laggards on imbibing international norms, or as the inhabitants of the ‘jungle’ as the EU’s chief diplomat puts it openly (EC35).

EU trade policy elites often insist that withdrawing preferences must be a measure of last resort. In this way, the EU is rendered as a benevolent trading partner that exhausts all possible avenues of political dialogue with ‘problematic’ GSP targets before ultimately resorting to more punitive economic measures, i.e., GSP withdrawals. In principle, the European Commission triggers the withdrawal procedure if there are no longer prospects for dialogue and ‘no signs of willingness to

change from the other country’ (Interview 24). The eventual decision to withdraw GSP culminates after a long political process of dialogue between EU institutions and between the EU and the third countries concerned. On political grounds, the EU is supposed to withdraw preferences because target countries neglect to adhere to the GSP conditions and fail to fulfil their obligations (Interview 51). In this process, the EU encourages the GSP targets to ‘show willingness to change’ (Interview 24). Otherwise, the European Parliament has been very vocal about leveraging the withdrawal of preferences more strongly as a ‘mechanism of control’ over countries that cannot and do not respect or ratify international conventions (Interview 16). This paternalising rationale is tellingly expressed in how the Co-Father of GSP at DG Trade infantilises GSP targets:

Withdrawal is a sanction, effectively sanctioning them, because we’re not happy with what they’re doing. So, we don’t call it sanctions. It’s a play with words, but effectively when people are enjoying a benefit for many, many years and you withdraw, it’s a sanction. *You know, it’s like a child. He’s playing football. You take the ball from him. It’s a form of sanction.* Of course, it goes back to MFN [most-favoured-nation], if you want. Technically and legally, by withdrawing, you go back to MFN, which is what most industrial countries pay, for example. But it’s a bit ironic to say I’m not sanctioning you because it will just bring you offense. We’re not even saying that. It is a sanction, and we say it is a sanction because *we want the government to know that we’re doing it and hopefully they will react before we need to take the measure.* (Interview 42; emphases added)

In this spirit, there are proposals by European civil society actors in collaboration with the European Parliament that would subject GSP targets to evolve towards an idealised mechanism of control and monitoring achieved by the intervener elsewhere on the basis of ‘best practices’ within the EU’s regulation on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU). In terms of the current GSP revision, an industrial official would like to see the introduction of an IUU-inspired traffic light system in GSP to finesse its monitoring regime:

The traffic light system means that there’s thorough and constant monitoring. You then get an amber light, if things are going badly. But with the amber light brings more resources to rectify the situation. I think this is the kind of thinking which is really needed in terms of GSP. So that you by the time you get to the red light, and partial or full withdrawal of preferences, you’ve actually shown that you really don’t give a shit, because you’ve gone through a whole process of support and access to other tools, which as a government you’ve clearly rejected and you’ve decided to go down the route of human rights violations and labour rights violations. (Interview 60)

Central to the belief that the EU should exercise more control over GSP targets is the presumption that the EU credibly possesses leverage and must exert this leverage to influence the political

behaviours of others through the sway of market access (Interviews 7; 10; 27; 32; 42; 45; 50). Yet the Left Political Adviser says that to be credible the EU must also adhere to the 27 international conventions linked to GSP conditionality since not all member states have apparently ratified all of them. They go on, ‘If we really want to apply what we say, you know, in terms of violation, SERIOUS violation and breach of human rights, then we should end all GSP [laughing]’ (Interview 18), implying that all GSP targets are problematic when it comes to the respect of international norms. Meanwhile, a senior EU advocate at Human Rights Watch depoliticises the act of withdrawing preferences from norm-breaking GSP+ targets because of their contractual relations with the EU as market access donor:

You can give them all the evidence you want that Israel is committing apartheid against the Palestinians. But there’s not going to be any measure from the EU against Israel because that’s politics. GSP+, it’s a legal framework. It’s a contractual, if you will, framework between two parties. So that, in theory, that element of politicization—politicization of the choice should not be there. So, it’s not a sanction. Arms embargo is a sanction. Targeted sanctions are sanctions, not the withdrawal of trade privileges. (Interview 45)

Even so, the withdrawal of GSP is extremely rare because EU policymakers consider it as a blunt tool. Historically, the EU has fully withdrawn GSP in three instances only on political grounds: Belarus, Burma/Myanmar, and Sri Lanka (Interviews 29; 33; 60). Recently, the EU has imposed a partial withdrawal of EBA from Cambodia, which is touted as a more nuanced way of addressing problematic sectors where gross violations are happening, especially in terms of land-grabbing issues in the Cambodian sugar sector (Interview 60). As a political adviser from the European Trade Union Confederation laments, DG Trade and EEAS rarely condemn GSP targets so as not to jeopardise diplomatic relations, whereas DG Employment may be more prepared to side with European trade unionists on imposing sanctions against countries deemed to be flouting ILO conventions (Interview 3). While the full withdrawal of preferences merits serious consideration in many GSP contexts in theory, a democracy expert laments that the EU rarely enforces this policy in practice, suggesting that ‘something must really go wrong and not even Duterte killing 40,000 people [under the war on drugs in the Philippines]—not even that changed anything’ (Interview 39). GSP withdrawals happen ‘in the case of very grave violations’ and against the wider constellations of political considerations and repertoire of other coercive instruments at the EU’s disposal (Interview 33).

6.4.2 Centring the (geo)politics of the intervener in GSP withdrawals

Instead of taking seriously the expressed needs of the targets of intervention, the EU centres its own (geo)political exigencies as intervener as to why GSP withdrawals are leveraged against some countries but not others. For instance, the EU has partially withdrawn Cambodia's preferential status since 2020. However, no similar political decision has been made vis-à-vis Myanmar despite the fact that both EBA countries stand accused of seriously and systematically violating core international conventions. Instead, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS explains that the EU has acted based on the broader context of political sanctions, including targeted ones, against the military regime in Myanmar (Interview 1).

According to one cabinet member in the European Commission, the EU considers carefully how GSP withdrawals are going to reconfigure the geopolitical alignments in a given region where GSP targets are situated (Interview 46). Based on a business and human rights expert, the absence of GSP withdrawal from Myanmar 'must be purely geopolitical. I don't see any other reason why. The Commission is probably concerned that if they take away GSP, the Chinese will step in completely again' (Interview 12). Without naming and shaming any particular GSP country, the cabinet member engages a thought experiment by postulating that a given GSP-dependent country is under a 'rogue and repressive' regime. In such a context, the EU assesses that GSP withdrawals 'would not punish the population', nor negatively impact people involuntarily, nor cause populations to 'suffer too much'. While the EU could always use the threat of GSP withdrawal as a leverage vis-à-vis a given problematic regime, there is a danger in mounting GSP withdrawals in the sense that sanctioned GSP targets could align more closely towards China or Russia. The cabinet member says, 'they are going to look to Beijing and Moscow', should the EU take away GSP from a given country 'to replace what they have lost'. This situation would be 'worse for everyone'. The cabinet member cites that China's own values in international relations have long-term consequences for regions like North Africa, Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa, which are attracted by China's discourse of international cooperation on an equal footing. As for Russia, sanctioned GSP targets might be drawn to the allure of doing business with alternative markets and receiving military support from the Kremlin (Interview 46).

Read against the controversy of leveraging GSP to extract political concessions on migration discussed in the previous chapter, the geopolitical exigencies on the part of the EU to sway GSP targets from other ‘great powers’—that are often in their own ways also colonially and imperially configured, just to make myself clear—becomes more pronounced. In a joint letter to the European Council, 25 civil society organisations reject the proposal to regulate readmissions within GSP because this tarnishes the EU’s partnership with GSP targets who might ‘look elsewhere’ for partners:

It puts the partnership with third countries at risk: misusing the GSP framework to force governments, including those of least developed countries, to make concessions on a politically sensitive issue, due to, inter alia, the significant contribution that remittances make to their economy, will put at stake the partnerships that have been developed and encourage third country governments to look elsewhere for economic and development cooperation. (CS21)

For the Human Rights Watch: ‘it is appalling how the EU could even consider pushing such an unpalatable proposal to countries from the “Global South” especially at a time of growing geopolitical competition with China and others’ (CS22).

In the Myanmar context, the articulated demands by the targets of intervention are rendered subservient to the EU’s own geopolitical commitments. While the positions of the Myanmar trade unions and the National Unity Government differ on questions surrounding EBA, the call of civil society actors for the withdrawal of EBA preferences has fallen on deaf ears in Brussels. The trade union movement and workers in the country’s EU-facing textile and garment economy have been demanding the EU to trigger the withdrawal process (Interviews 19; 48) on the basis of the military regime’s grave repressions against the Rohingya minority and civilian populations following the coup d’état a few years ago. For an industriALL official, EBA suspension is seen by civil society in Myanmar ‘as a means of trying to isolate the government and stop the flow of revenue to companies linked to the government and the army’ (Interview 60). At the same time, several big European brands refuse to pull out of Myanmar, arguing they opt to stay in order to ‘protect the most vulnerable, poorest workers in the garment sector’ (Interview 60). Yet those same workers are asking for the EBA to be removed. But the garment companies have a louder voice politically and are able to present Myanmar workers in a different way. Beyond the garment

sector, workers in the oil and gas industry have been calling for the suspension of EBA not only to put pressure on the government but also to compel heavily invested businesses to divest from Myanmar (Interview 60). Despite these demands, the EU considers that EBA is ‘still important in order to support the local population. We didn’t want to hit them more than they were being hit by their government, by the junta already’ (Interview 33).

EU discourse on GSP orientates the political realities of the targets of intervention around those of the intervening-self. Especially in the case of GSP-dependent countries, the reality of the intervened faces outward and is essentially bound symbolically to the political will of the intervener, thereby entrenching GSP-dependent targets into a situation where EU presence is made normal and necessary. As a protagonist subject, the EU does not only help the global souths progress and fulfil their international obligations, but it also chooses not to strictly follow the letter of the GSP regulation in order to protect the already vulnerable (Interviews 43; 46; 60; 62) since ‘to “punish” a country can do more harm than good’ (Interview 38).

This protagonist complex asserts itself in calls to nuance our interpretation of how GSP withdrawals work in defense of workers at the bottom end of GSP supply chains. For instance, a trade diplomat from the EuroMed 9 group reasons that ‘I wouldn’t say our legislation is logical because we are constantly looking at socio-political considerations. GSP is not physics’ (Interview 61). This points to the moral hazard of strictly imposing coercive measures against ‘unruly’ GSP targets over which the EU has presumed leverage and the social ramifications of ‘pulling the plug’ on the poor (Interview 36).

According to the GSP Policy Officer at DG Trade, the decision to withdraw GSP depends on the type of leverage the EU enjoys over third countries. The European Commission takes seriously the socio-economic impacts of suspending tariff preferences, especially when a great number of workers, especially women, would be disproportionately affected. For instance, the official line from the Commission is that the EU’s decision to partially withdraw Cambodia’s EBA preferences owes to this logic by exempting the garment industry there (Interview 7). Furthermore, this partial withdrawal reinforces ‘the weight of development needs for the local population’ (Interview 13). Meanwhile, the Co-Father of GSP at EEAS reasons that withdrawing preferences is ‘not a very

good administrative practice' because it runs the danger of further 'victimising' workers in GSP contexts:

You won't kill the fishermen, even if they've done something wrong, because basically when you take measures, you have to look at the effect on the workers, farmers in that country. These are people who very often are not responsible for the government's deeds and acts. No, they're actually victims, very often. So, by withdrawing benefits, we are doubling the punishment. [...] How do you put somebody under pressure without, you know, killing him? (Interview 42)

While the International Trade Committee Political Adviser recognises that GSP withdrawals ultimately cause socio-economic harms against workers especially in EU-dependent industries, the moral dilemma recentres EU agency in terms of learning how to better use its leverage through GSP in a different way:

We say we want to promote values with this. We withdraw preferences. We hurt workers. And it's very unlikely that the situation on the ground will change. You achieve nothing [smiling] which is of course the exact opposite of what you want to do with the system. I mean it might be a bit too black and white, but I don't think that we can claim that the withdrawal of preferences in the case of Cambodia has led either to an amelioration of the situation in Cambodia or in the other two countries that we had this enhanced cooperation with. So, the lever is there but maybe we just need to learn to use it in a different way. (Interview 27)

For Maria Arena, ex-chair of the Sub-Committee on Human Rights at the European Parliament, this means tweaking the procedural aspects of monitoring missions and sanctions by having more transparency about when to decide to withdraw preferences or not and why (Interview 22). For a businessperson in Brussels, this means better monitoring and more targeted coercive measures rather than imposing blanket sanctions in the form of sectoral or country-wide GSP withdrawals (Interview 2). In other words, GSP normalises the necessity of EU presence and intervention again and again, rather than questioning and denaturalising the fundamentally hierarchical power relations that exist between the EU and GSP targets.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have challenged the official GSP partnership discourse by uncovering how the EU increasingly uses interventionist logics in the context of GSP monitoring missions and withdrawals. That is, how the EU justifies policing the governance performance of GSP targets on

a range of international conventions on human rights, labour rights, good governance, climate, and the environment. Applying the logic of intervention *through* trade to the study of GSP matters because it foregrounds how this policy is discursively constituted within hierarchical power relations and dynamics that stubbornly centre EU presence. This does not only reinforce objectifying the global souths in global politics as perpetually in need of external assistance but also further crystallise the EU's ostensibly ethical imperative of 'becoming the intervener' rather than prioritising indigenous views and solutions, as Rutazibwa (2010) reminds us.

Using the notions of subversion and sub-version of intervention (Jeandesboz 2015) that I discussed in the introductory chapter, I have contested the official account of GSP as a mode of partnership, cooperation, and dialogue by revealing how it is undermined by logics of tutelage and control, even expressed by progressive civil society voices themselves. I contend that this alternative interpretation of GSP unmasks how (the threat of) withdrawing GSP ultimately centres the EU's (geo)political considerations and orientates the political realities of GSP targets around those of the intervening-self.

Subversive interpretations of GSP articulate the discourse of progressive civil society and political actors in Brussels *against* what they see as *procedurally* lacking, insufficient, or problematic within the GSP regime in order for the EU to intervene more powerfully, coherently and effectively in GSP-dependent contexts. In other words, the level of their discourse does not intend to subvert the *substantive* content of intervening in the global souths through GSP. Far from it. So-called progressive voices in Brussels want to harness it, leverage it, assert it with a view to disciplining and exerting more control over norm-breaking GSP targets.

In tandem, a sub-version of the official GSP+ intervention exists in the language of enhanced engagement concerning 'problematic' EBA countries with whom the EU does not have any formal means of normative oversight similar to the GSP+ mechanism. This sub-version illustrates how interventionist logics unfold 'underneath' the official GSP+ monitoring machine. They speak to the subtle and complex character of intervention through the workings of trade. This chapter has shown the arbitrariness of 'enhanced engagement' with certain 'least developed' countries that the EU finds problematic but cannot officially monitor because these target countries do not owe

‘hard’ obligations towards Brussels, unlike GSP+ targets. ‘Enhanced engagement’ enables the EU to *de facto* intensify political scrutiny over certain targets under Everything but Arms, monitor them, and police their observance of international conventions. In this context, what becomes clear is ‘a pedagogical strategy where subjects of intervention are considered under tutelage from the “technicians” of the mission’ (Jeandesboz 2015, 449). When the EU fails to instigate social and political reforms in GSP targets through monitoring and dialogue, the discursive weight of withdrawing preferences reproduces unequal power relations between the EU-self who is a normative power and the GSP targets who are unruly others. The (geo)political realities of the EU as the intervener trump the needs articulated by the targets of intervention themselves and reproduce the protagonist presence of the EU.

Crucially, I claim that the global souths are entrenched in the ‘discursive closure’ of contemporary GSP relations that are fundamentally enmeshed in *colonial difference*. That is, how EU trade policy elites normalise EU presence in the global souths via GSP. Without EU presence, the global souths apparently would remain immobile, incapable, and unable to enact any meaningful social and political changes *themselves*. Without EU intervention through monitoring missions, the global souths apparently would be inert when it comes to fulfilling their international obligations seriously. This discursive closure demands, in future inquiries sustaining decolonial critiques of GSP, the imperative of ‘taking seriously the interpretations and experiences of the targets of intervention – those people whose political systems and livelihoods are supposed to be transformed by the expertise and assistance of international assistance’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 4). Here, taking seriously the historical, social and political presence of GSP targets would explicate how the interventionist logics of GSP I have exposed here erect not only discursive but also material forms of hierarchies in the situated context of GSP targets themselves. As I have argued, the official discourse of partnerships as a way of seeing GSP relations with the global souths obscures the colonial/modern logics of intervention. Puncturing this discourse, coloniality forces us to re-read the GSP policy and how it enshrouds both symbolic and material power hierarchies wherein the ‘unruly’ global souths ought to be disciplined and transformed through the interventionist regimes of the ‘normative’ EU in external relations.

Conclusion: Coloniality of GSP

Gone is the ethnographic glitch I encountered with an EU delegation official about their meaning-making on the GSP policy a decade ago in Manila. In hindsight, their puzzling assertion that we, in the Philippines, must be grateful that we were not entitled to the most preferential market access concessions granted by the EU now makes political sense to me.

Grounded in decolonial and interpretive knowledges, this dissertation has engaged with this central research question: How are the global souths imagined in EU trade policy discourses? Through GSP, I contend that the global souths are coded into intersubjectively shared discourses of interdependence, global governance, and international partnerships. Yet such regimes of meaning are imbued with hierarchical, Eurocentric, and interventionist logics that implicate GSP into coloniality as a mode of subordinating and inferiorising the global souths vis-à-vis the EU. Merely seeing GSP as a rational tariff liberalisation instrument or as a well-intentioned act of partnership obfuscates how the policy is complicit in perpetuating global hierarchies between the EU and the global souths. There is more to GSP than tariff or generosity: the political meanings that saturate it as a policy deeply entangled in colonial/modern relations outside formal colonialism. Beyond positivist thinking, GSP is charged with a specific ensemble of meanings that the EU exploits to order and reorder its economic and political relations with the global souths. As a policy, GSP does not only engender hierarchies between the EU and the targets of GSP; it also stratifies and differentiates between the targets of GSP themselves. In making these claims, I have articulated three main analytical moves by unsettling Eurocentric knowledges about using GSP as a tool of global governance through trade (Part I), by historicising GSP within global economic hierarchies amidst supposedly interdependent trade relations between the European Economic Community and the Third World (Part II), and by exposing the interventionist logics behind the EU's discourse of partnerships when it comes to exploiting GSP to enforce international conventions in the global souths (Part III).

I began this dissertation by problematising the language of trade partnerships that the EU inscribes to its GSP relations with the global souths. In EU trade policy scholarship and European Studies, I situated GSP within broader questions around Eurocentrism, hierarchies, and intervention by

implicating it within coloniality as global mode of power that perpetuates civilisational, economic, racialised, gendered, and other hierarchies in the modern world order beyond formal colonialism. I also stipulated a number of caveats to delineate my work from neocolonial and postcolonial critiques. In doing so, I clarified that my dissertation is articulating a decolonial critique of GSP, i.e., making explicit how colonial/modern relations of power persist through EU trade policy discourses about the global souths.

In Chapter 1, I situated the dissertation in interpretive political science, in general, and the critical scholarship on EU trade policy, in particular. From a decolonial epistemic location, I clarified my ontological and epistemological commitments drawing upon interpretive and decolonial knowledges. Given the posture that the project assumes in terms of the politics of knowledge generation and the importance of practising epistemic humility, I also explicitly stated that mounting a decolonial critique has been the main interpretive goal of the dissertation. Although EU trade policy may be researched through different interpretive methodologies and methods, I argued for ‘studying up’ differently situated policy elites behind the (re)production of GSP through policy ethnography. In conceptualising Brussels as an ethnographic field, I practised polymorphic engagement by relying on elite interviewing, archival research, and discourse analysis with a focus on uncovering colonial/modern logics in order to generate and analyse data. Finally, I reflexively wrote the *indio* self in and the ways in which my social and epistemic locations have not only shaped but also complicated my methodological choices, including on questions of research ethics, in critical inquiries that study upwards.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed the academic literature on GSP with a focus on how the scholarly discourse of global governance through trade privileges the EU as a global trade power that is able and willing to govern the global souths. I argued that the academy has been largely impervious to alternative ways of knowing that problematise this discourse. In particular, I discerned four distinct strands of political science writings that investigate how the EU is thought to externalise norms in its preferential trade relations with the global souths: (1) because of the Brussels Effect, (2) as determined by a given constellation of political economy interests, (3) by way of policy export, or (4) through the imposition of sanctions. I posited that such writings not only often sidestep the political agency of people that those norms supposedly claim to transform, but also fail to

interrogate the worldviews of, and the unequal power relations (re)produced by, those engaged in articulating a more normative EU trade policy. As such, this chapter cleared the ground for an interpretive approach to EU trade policy, with an emphasis on making explicit the colonial/modern logics underpinning GSP policy discourses as regards ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ countries.

In Chapter 3, I contextualised how the Third World prevailed in its struggle to gain preferential market access to the EEC without giving market access concessions in return. Based on archival research conducted in the Historical Archives of the European Commission in Brussels, I interpreted how the EEC erected a discourse of interdependence through GSP in the sixties and seventies as it legislated a policy of generalised preferences. The EEC leveraged this discourse to emphasise its deep sense of responsibility for being the first major industrialised power to institute a GSP regime as ‘an act of faith and solidarity towards disadvantaged countries’. Not only did the Community act responsibly in disproportionately carrying the ‘burdens’ of offering trade concessions to the rest of the Third World, but it also shielded the interests of its African associates and its own industries at home, thereby ostensibly promoting harmonious South–North cooperation on trade.

In Chapter 4, I contradicted this official interdependence discourse by unmasking how the EEC GSP regime reinscribed hierarchical relations of power within a historical milieu supposedly characterised by ‘solidaristic ties’ and ‘economic interdependence’ in line with Third World calls for a New International Economic Order undoing economic imperialism and dependency. First, parochial considerations drove the highly politicised process of defining the ‘developing’ world and, in effect, who could and could not claim preferential access to the Common Market. Second, the Community’s GSP policy fractured the Third World by differentiating between associated African countries and non-associated countries from the rest of the Third World. Last but not least, GSP regurgitated colonial/modern logics as the UK defended to preserve its traditional commercial ties with Asian Commonwealth countries and Hong Kong as a dependent territory within an enlarged EEC. Recovering these historiographical erasures or silences stands in contradiction to the belief of some EU trade policy elites I interviewed that GSP is detached from colonial relations.

In Chapter 5, I posited that, through a discourse of partnerships via GSP, the EU normalises the global souths to be in perpetual need of intervention for them ‘develop’ not only by trading, but also by ‘striving more’ and ‘behaving better’ to fulfil their obligations to uphold the liberal international order. Drawing on 65 semi-structured interviews with trade policy elites through fieldwork in Brussels, I generated an account of the discursive space entrenching GSP and its political significance, as seen by policy elites in EU institutions, member states, civil society, and business. In this account, the EU preferentially opens the single market for the benefit of the global souths, but targets shall respect and comply with international conventions. First, I elucidated the *raison d’être* of GSP and how the EU differentiates between its targets, thereby reifying hierarchies not only between the EU and the global souths, but also between the global souths themselves. Second, I narrated how different EU policy actors exert contesting interpretations of making GSP more normative. Despite these interpretive differences, the need for EU intervention remains unswerving. Third, I discussed the language of leverage that the EU employs to propagate international norms by means of preferential market access to the EU, particularly in the context of sustainability and migration. Finally, I framed and problematised the GSP ‘gaze’ within the broader context of the presumed shift from development cooperation to international partnerships in EU external relations.

In Chapter 6, I challenged the official EU discourse of international partnerships by explicating how this discourse occludes increasingly interventionist logics that reproduce colonial difference between the ‘normative’ EU and the ‘unruly’ global souths through EU monitoring missions and GSP withdrawals. I argued that, by leveraging market access, the EU justifies enhanced engagement and political dialogue with GSP targets through stricter monitoring to address political shortcomings in GSP targets. Otherwise, the EU may (threaten to) withdraw market access from norm-breakers. I questioned the official account of GSP as a policy based on partnership, cooperation, and dialogue by demonstrating how it is undermined by logics of ‘tutelage’ and ‘control’ even in the language of so-called progressive political voices. By doing so, I uncovered how the language around GSP withdrawals, from the perspective of the EU, ultimately centres the intervener’s (geo)political considerations and orientates the political realities of GSP targets around those of the intervening-self. Last but not least, by reconceptualising GSP as entrenched in the logics of intervention *through* trade, I pointed to the need to scrutinise how such increasingly

interventionist logics unfold in practice from the perspectives and experiences of peoples in the GSP targets.

Overall, this dissertation has articulated *a* critique of GSP through three analytical manoeuvres. First, I have elucidated the subjective and inter-subjective relations of the community of interpreters responsible for knowing, producing, and (re)regulating GSP as an EU policy. Scholarly, historical and political discourses constitute the global souths within interpretive frameworks of normative global governance, interdependent economic relations, and international partnerships. Second, I have contradicted these discourses by claiming that Eurocentric, hierarchical and interventionist logics run implicitly underneath such discourses. Last but not least, I have sought to move the critique of policy further—being the *indio* that I am—by implicating GSP discourses within the colonial/modern global capitalist order.

Yet, by placing interpretivism as a methodology in a complicated conversation with decolonial knowledges, some might well accuse me of sailing too close to the wind: that my critique superimposes my own subjectivity over those of others, especially my 60+ research participants who may not necessarily see or experience our world today along colonial/modern lines. In my view, this misreads the ontological and epistemological presuppositions of interpretive research. How we view the world is intimately tied with our social *and* epistemic location in the world. To the extent that I have taken the time to elucidate the official discourses of the EU trade policy establishment in ways intelligible to them, I have paid my interpretive dues. And one may well stop here and call it a day. But what is critique good for if it does not call out structural logics of power that ask us to pause and think harder about the political stakes involved in maintaining the status quo of GSP through official discourses? In my view, countering the discourses that keep GSP afloat aligns with—not against—the interpretive ethos of questioning depoliticised, taken-for-granted assumptions about the social and political world. Imagining global relations differently ‘requires from those of us at the hegemonic centre a willingness to a dislocation of power; an openness to (have others) redefine expertise and rigour, and to discomfort in the face of new knowledges’ (Rutazibwa 2020b, 240).

In critiquing EU trade policy, it is imperative to read GSP and the implicit logics of Eurocentrism, hierarchies, and intervention through the lens of coloniality as the connective tissue that imbricates these often submerged logics together. There are, of course, many theoretical perspectives that can be used to make sense of the EU's discourses about the global souths in the context of GSP; the subjective interpretation I articulate here is one attempt. Crucially, grasping the coloniality of GSP complicates the central idea of the 'hermeneutic circle' in interpretive analysis, as the *indio* researcher refuses to stay faithful to the subjective and intersubjective views of the interpretive community that makes or remakes GSP as a policy. To them, I fail to play the role of the 'subservient son'¹⁴⁰ in both the ethnographic and scholarly fields by going against the grain of EU-centric interpretive frameworks.

For me, it is urgent to resist certain equivocations in reaction to critiquing the EU GSP policy from a decolonial epistemic location. Throughout the research process, I have encountered at least four tensions that often undermine attempts to displace Eurocentrism in European Studies and the coloniality of the EU in world politics. Perhaps the most damning is the accusation that critiquing Brussels and the trade policy establishment there means fuelling Euroscepticism. *You're critical of Brussels, so you must be Eurosceptic*. This is indefensible as Eurosceptic and counter-Eurocentric (not anti-European!) movements stem from distinct worldviews and articulate different political commitments. The former is often forged in nativist, nation-state-centric, protectionist, racist, white supremacist ideologies that want to roll back on EU integration. Consider: Brexit. The latter is born in anti-imperial and decolonial struggles that oppose racism and white supremacy and prioritise historically marginalised peoples and perspectives. Think: Black Lives Matter.

Campism is also a familiar refrain. *You're critical of the EU, so you must be pro-Russia or pro-China*. Wearied by many colonial and imperial referents (Spain, US, Japan, China, the EU, and even imperial Manila), I used to think I had to take a 'side' scholarly and politically. But seeing the world by way of 'coloniality' means thinking with decolonial and anti-imperial struggles in

¹⁴⁰ This expression is a reformulation of Leila Abu-Lughod's 'dutiful daughter'. Abu-Lughod, L. (1988) "Fieldwork of a 'dutiful' daughter." In S. Altorki and El-Solh (Eds.) Arab women in the field. New York: Syracuse University Press.

transnational and multi-arrowed ways. Genuinely committing to decolonial and anti-imperial politics means rejecting all forms of colonial and imperial domination.

Another scathing rebuttal is that decolonial critiques are nothing but a form of victimisation. *You keep blaming Brussels as the bad guy, but playing the victim is really what you are doing.* The presumption goes something like this: by speaking about the EU as a colonial power in the past and present tenses, critics of the ‘C-word’ end up perpetuating the discourses of the coloniser about the colonised as essentially being powerless, othered, victimised. Yet this bad-faith rebuttal does not only deflect Europe’s responsibility to confront colonial legacies and continuities, but it also distorts the idea that decolonial thinking and praxis are about resistance and the rehabilitation of political subjectivities. As such, exponents of decolonial politics, properly understood, are agency-affirming; they do not wallow in self-victimhood.

Last but not least: what-about-ism. *You’re critical of us, but what about the oppressors in your own country?* But critique is not a zero-sum game. Being critical of the EU does not automatically translate to being apologists for, say, the murderous Duterte regime or the kleptocratic Marcos regime in the Philippines. Indeed, from a decolonial standpoint, I would be the first to unflinchingly implicate these regimes in the colonial matrix of power, i.e., how they, too, are embedded in (non)western colonial/modern projects. These types of critique can co-exist or be pursued independently without undermining one or the other. Such mental exercises do not only cheapen discourses and practices that upend Eurocentrism, but also further asphyxiate other ways of knowing and obstruct democratic possibilities for doing international relations differently and ethically on the basis of justice, responsibility, and reparative action (Sabaratnam 2017).

That being said, I claim that coloniality operates in and through GSP as it inheres within a world order predicated upon coloniality/modernity. In this understanding, coloniality lives on within GSP because it relegates the subjectivities of the global souths to a never-ending state of lack and becoming (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014), thereby making particular relations politically possible through Eurocentric, hierarchical and interventionist logics that permeate discourses of normative global governance, interdependent economic relations, and international partnerships. These discourses replicate the ‘specific constructions of the colonial/Third World subject in/through

discourse in ways that allow the exercise of power over it’ (Escobar 1995, 9). As a locus of power, GSP normalises the necessity of EU presence in/for the global souths.

In global politics, the EU sees itself as a protagonist subject that supposedly thinks, speaks, and acts in the name of its core constitutional values: democracy, equality, freedom, human rights, and rule of law. This dissertation has, I hope, uncovered how this works in the context of trade policy and GSP. Yet this story untethers and absolves the EU-self from the colonial/modern baggage of its constituent member states. Such is the well-known ‘virgin birth’ myth of the EU project:

while the modern nation-state versions of the erstwhile imperial metropolises remained shaped by their colonial pasts, Europe in its incarnation as the EEC and later the EU, sought to capitalize on the myth of its virgin birth and in the process redefine itself as a post-imperial peace project: post-imperial *within*, as no longer shall big European states bully smaller states into submission; post-imperial *without*, as no longer shall Europe impose its will and whims onto the rest of the world. The ‘post’ here would be about transcending the past and committing once and for all to the spirit and letter of multilateralism. (Nicolaïdis and Onar 2015, 2)

This myth muddles how the EU as a political project has been, and continues to be, complicit in sustaining colonial/modern logics, for instance, in Africa–EU relations (Rutazibwa 2010; Haastrup, Duggan, and Mah 2021; Sebhatu 2020) or in trade relations between the EU and the global souths (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023; Langan 2023). Coloniality allows us to see more clearly and, therefore, call out scholarly, historical and political discourses that cement the EU’s position as a global power setting the terms of conversation for the global souths in world politics.

Contributions to knowing GSP, otherwise

In articulating a critique of EU GSP, this dissertation has contributed in a number of ways to EU trade policy scholarship and to ongoing political and scholarly discussions about overcoming Eurocentrism in Europe and European Studies. It has mounted a counter-discourse to taken-for-granted scholarly, historical and political discourses about ‘developing’ and ‘least developed’ societies in EU external trade relations. Taking decolonial and interpretive commitments seriously, this project has endeavoured to ‘engage, examine, retrieve and cultivate other ways of thinking

about and being in the world that can form alternative points of departure to the hegemonic knowledges of empire' (Sabaratnam 2017, 7).

In the context of the belated intellectual encounter between EU policy studies and interpretivism (Heinelt and Münch 2018), I have empirically contributed to the interpretive research agenda on EU trade policy, with a particular accent on GSP. More specifically, I have directly responded to Bollen's scholarly plea for 'the construction of a "thicker" picture of European trade policy [which] will require that we look at the commitments and world views of the people involved in producing it' (Bollen 2018, 202). To generate a credibly 'thicker' interpretation of GSP through extensive interviewing, I have not only scrutinised the meaning-making of DG Trade officials as the *chef de file* responsible for (re)producing GSP, but also of other policy elites from the European Commission, European Parliament, EU member states, civil society, and business who have a political stake in the policy. In methodological terms, my research complicates how we think critically about generalised preferences within a growing body of interpretive writings on EU trade policy (Bollen 2018; Jacobs and Orbie 2020; Oleart 2021; Nessel and Verhaeghe 2022; Nessel 2023; Alcazar III 2024). In particular, studying up Brussels as a field moves beyond the conventional focus on 'found' speech acts in (critical) discourse analysis, which tends to analytically neglect coloniality. By studying up, I have uncovered implicit meanings inscribed into GSP and rendered them more explicit through ethnographic immersion. This is important to underline since the extant trade policy scholarship within the Critical European Studies project (Jacobs and Orbie 2020) and the ground-breaking handbook on interpretive approaches to EU policies (Bollen 2018) are both silent on the imperative of unmasking the coloniality of EU trade policy discourses. Additionally, my field research in Brussels has demonstrated the methodological promise of polymorphic engagement in terms of generating a wide range of interpretive data beyond extended participant observation, which may not be feasible in certain policy communities (e.g., DG Trade) due to access issues. Rather than ignoring the EU's presumed others, I have prioritised in this thesis a politics of refusal that turns the ethnographic gaze from the 'subaltern' towards the powerful who are complicit in reproducing colonial/modern logics (Tuck and Yang 2014).

Apart from contributing to the growing body of interpretive writings on EU (trade) policies, I have also contributed to the emerging decolonial scholarship on EU trade policy (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023; Langan 2023). As Sabaratnam rightly points out, critiques of coloniality ‘tend to operate in a grand historical and rather abstract register, sketching broad connections between accumulations of wealth and the production of knowledge at a global level’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 136). However, by concretely focusing on GSP as an empirical anchor and as a discrete, often understudied, facet of the ‘colonial global economy’ (Bhambra 2021a), my intervention has demonstrated empirically how coloniality operates in EU trade policy discourses about the global souths. My critique of GSP has reinforced existing scholarship that takes seriously the colonial past and present of the EU as a global trade and development actor from decolonial, neocolonial and postcolonial perspectives (e.g., Rutazibwa 2010; Langan 2018; Hastrup 2020; Orbie 2021; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023; Langan 2023). In doing so, however, I have carefully thought through the affinity but also incommensurability between these important interpretive frameworks. Given the unique context of GSP relations and the conceptual configuration of my dissertation, I have explicitly chosen to mount a decolonial critique of GSP, which may not necessarily cohere with neocolonial and postcolonial critiques on epistemological grounds because they speak to different genealogies of knowledge and traditions of critique. Speaking from a position of care and humility and given the growing scholarly interest in decolonial theory and praxis, I insist it is imperative that fellow travellers be explicit about their ontological and epistemological commitments when researching the C-word so as not to confuse but clarify critique. Indeed, this problem has become painfully acute in the face of the ‘decentring agenda’ in European Studies because it problematically muddles postcolonial and decolonial thinking in its attempt to overcome Eurocentrism while ostensibly recentring EU power in world politics (Orbie et al. 2023).

To ongoing political conversations in Europe about confronting Europe’s colonial past (EP23; EP24), my research serves as a modest contribution as it demonstrates how the colonial question cannot be disentangled from the history of GSP, contrary to the belief of some EU trade policy elites in Brussels. This belief seemingly rests on the broader ‘colonial amnesia’ besetting European memory politics where remembrance regimes have emphasised the Holocaust, National Socialism,

and Stalinism while tending to forget Europe's imperial and colonial histories (Sierp 2020). A scholar of European history and memory studies observes that:

The reason of why the EU has failed to “adequately gauge the weight of the colonial legacy of some of the EU's member states on the EU's external relations” might lie in its inability to remember and/or its conscious choice to forget this legacy. (ibid., 699)

Whether the EU is unable to remember or deliberately elects not to remember the colonial legacies of its member states, insights from my extensive fieldwork support those calling for the EU to ‘ensure that its diplomats and officials have a proper understanding of Europe's colonial past and how Europe is really viewed around the world’ (Cameron and Islam 2021). Propagating this historical consciousness—crucial though it may be as a democratic undertaking—runs the risk of becoming ethically indefensible if it is asserted from the position of realising Geopolitical Europe without meaningfully squashing historically grown structural power imbalances between the EU and its supposed others in world politics (Orbie et al. 2023). For this reason, my research demonstrates the importance of not only situating GSP historically in colonial relations but also uncovering the ways in which colonial/modern relations persist even today through trade. It is a democratic invitation for the EU to consider ethical retreat (Rutazibwa 2014), ethical responsibility (Sabaratnam 2017), and reparative actions (Bhambra 2022) to ensure that its trade policy is not causing epistemic and material harms to the very peoples whose lives the EU is supposedly lifting up.

In the context of ongoing efforts to overcome Eurocentrism in European Studies, my dissertation has exemplified that ‘one can remain in Europe to study Europe and still [...] step away from Eurocentrism’ (David et al. 2023, 154) without, of course, discounting the more demanding imperative of shifting the geography of knowledge-making. This task is, however, insufficient. By unmasking the colonial/modern logics of EU trade policy discourses about the global souths, I have cleared the ground for further counter-Eurocentric studies that critique how coloniality operates *materially* through GSP in concrete sites of struggles in the global souths (Gandarilla Salgado, García-Bravo, and Benzi 2021, 212). As a market-making machine, GSP manifests itself in, and impinges upon, the real lives and livelihoods of real peoples in rice fields, on garment factory floors, and in fishing grounds across the global souths. Indeed, my critique of coloniality

implies that, as a next step, it is crucial to overcome the tendency to dwell on the symbolic and discursive underside of coloniality and to lay bare the more material underside of the colonial/modern order in ethically and politically emancipatory ways (Fúnez-Flores 2022).

Alternative interpretations: GSP and the garden/jungle metaphor

Coloniality is one interpretive account of GSP. We can discern at least three other alternative readings of GSP based on liberal, realist and political economy accounts, which are best read here as ‘ideal types’ and not to suggest that these interpretive lenses do not bleed into each other. For instance, the EU has been increasingly deploying normative discourses to legitimise the notion of ‘Geopolitical Europe’ and its stronger and more assertive place in world politics, including through trade. Geopolitical Europe reflects:

a more pronounced realist language that is being articulated slowly by the EU trade policy establishment and maybe even more slowly in EU trade relations with so-called ‘developing’ countries. To be clear, this ‘new’ geopolitical discourse [...] is tinged with strong pretensions of Europeans being more civilised and being in an exemplary position for other societies to emulate. Geopolitical Europe is legitimised by virtue of the ‘special’ character of the EU in the world. (Alcazar III, Nessel and Orbic 2023, 198)

Crucially, I argue that alternative accounts from liberal, realist and political economy perspectives are ill-equipped to interpret GSP *otherwise* given their refusal or inability to situate GSP within colonial/modern relations. I employ the infamous garden/jungle metaphor used by none other than the EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell in his 2023 Bruges speech to think through standard liberal, realist and political economy readings of the EU GSP regime and the global souths. I invoke the garden/jungle metaphor not because it is surprising (at least to those of us highly attuned to this type of racist, colonialist othering, anyway). I invoke the garden/jungle metaphor since ‘depicting a European garden surrounded by a jungle to future European elites at the College of Europe is problematic not only because it ignores the importance of Europe’s colonial past in people’s perceptions of the EU but also because it essentially exemplifies colonial narratives’ (Nessel 2023, 325).

Liberal interpretation: Let's nuance the garden/jungle metaphor!

A liberal interpretation would rearticulate the official EU interpretation of GSP as a policy of cultivating trade partnerships with the global souths. This view would insist on a nuanced understanding of the garden/jungle discourse because it is nothing but a discursive aberration or distraction that does not *really* capture the EU's benign and generous intentions for its GSP partners.

Historically speaking, the European Economic Community responded in 1971 to UNCTAD demands and established the world's first ever GSP policy as 'an act of faith and solidarity towards disadvantaged countries'¹⁴¹ and 'a real turning point in international trade relations'.¹⁴² In this sense, the GSP has always meant to be a generous gift for the developing world since its inception.

In contemporary political discourse, the EU, in preferentially opening its markets, lifts people out of poverty in 'developing' countries by enabling them to trade more in global markets, especially 'least developed' countries through EBA (e.g., EC1; EC3; EC8; EC12; EC17; EC30; EP9; Interviews 7, 32, 42). At the same time, the EU entices 'vulnerable' countries to live up to their commitments to international conventions on human rights, labour rights, and environmental protection through GSP+ (e.g., LEX1; LEX2; EC1; EC2; EC4; EP1; EP2; EP3; EP5; EP6; EP7; EP8; EP9; EP10; EP14; EP16; EP18; Interviews 6; 10; 36; 38). In this way, GSP contributes to the broader project of sustainable development. For these reasons, GSP should rather be seen as one of the most generous and most development-friendly GSP policies available because of its emphasis on both trade and norms. In this reasoning, liberals might even acknowledge 'postcolonial' or 'neocolonial' sentiments raised about political conditionalities in GSP partner countries. However, they would insist that colonial relations are a thing of the past because the idea of GSP is 'trade with human rights' (Interview 22) and because now GSP countries have a choice to be subjected to the political conditionalities of GSP+ or not. As a development policy expert explains: 'Colonial powers were imposing their preferences and their choices on their

¹⁴¹ « un acte de foi et de solidarité vis-à-vis des pays défavorisés » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, 7 juillet 1971, Pas de cadeau pour le tiers monde, Journal de Genève, Jasmine Audemars.

¹⁴² « Il s'agit également d'un véritable tournant dans les relations commerciales internationales » HAEC BAC 3/1978 No. 1042, juin 1971, Commission de la CEE, Note d'information, La CEE et les préférences généralisées en faveur des produits semi-finis et manufactures des pays en voie de développement.

colonies. In this case, this [GSP] thing, it's more kind of norm—you know exportation of norms and trying to be an international norm-setter and influence norms. But nothing forces a country' (Interview 15).

In a liberal worldview, scholarly discourse would take for granted the logic that the EU is not quite bluntly exporting its own norms but rather internationally recognised conventions as a feature of the GSP conditionality system (Meissner 2021). That in fact GSP propagates not only beneficial pro-development trade relations (Woolcock 2014) but also promoting human rights through one of the very few policy instruments at the EU's disposal where it can convince 'developing' countries not to break international norms (Yap 2015).

In sum, colonial/modern relations are occluded and rendered illegible because, from a liberal perspective, the EU cultivates partnerships with the global souths through GSP.

Realist interpretation: But what's the problem with the garden/jungle metaphor?

A realist interpretation would rationalise the GSP as one of the tools at the EU's disposal to pursue its geopolitical interests and exert its market power. Realists would not find the garden/jungle metaphor particularly problematic because the differentiation is quite central to the realist notion of 'anarchy' in international affairs. Through whatever means possible or necessary, the EU as the garden has to defend its interests vis-à-vis the dark, unruly outside world as the jungle.

Historically speaking, the creation of GSP brought the EEC 'undoubted political benefits [...] without having to pay any serious economic price'.¹⁴³ GSP functioned as a way for the EEC to strategically enhance its more global role in trade and development vis-à-vis the Third World beyond its hitherto Africa-centric focus against the backdrop of Cold War rivalries and of managing 'greyhounds' salivating for market access to Western Europe.

¹⁴³ HAEC BAC 141/1987 No. 583, DG RELEX's speaking note for Mr Gundelach (under cover Cabinet Soames), The Community's GSP Scheme for 1977, 18 November 1976.

In contemporary political discourse, by preferentially opening its markets, the EU presumably enhances its soft power influence over ‘developing’ countries and conditions them to sign, in time, free trade agreements that satiate EU economic interests (e.g., Interviews 1; 2; 9; 12; 13; 17; 19; 24; 37; 39; 54; 60; 63). Meanwhile, GSP benefits EU consumers by ensuring cheap importations of raw materials and manufactured goods at a time of food insecurity and cost-of-living crises (e.g., EC47; EC49). From a realist perspective, a geopolitical EU would calculate as to how best to maximise its hard power projection using the mechanisms within GSP. For instance, state-centric interests pandering to anti-immigration voter sentiments would explain why the EU would be prepared to politicise the readmissions of migrants as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis migrant-sending GSP countries, according to The Left Political Adviser who criticised the politicisation of migration through GSP by right-wing politicians (Interview 64). That said, the EU’s will to sanction and withdraw preferences from GSP norm-breakers of international conventions would depend on the level of perceived or real leverage it possesses over a given GSP country. A realist would also hypothesise that the more economic interests that EU has cultivated in a given country (e.g., through GSP-related foreign investments or supply chains), the less likely it would be willing to trigger the withdrawal mechanism, even if the government of that country were to be found in violation of international conventions. At the same time, this calculus would be tempered by the EU’s interest in a given region in competition with other ‘great powers’. By punishing GSP countries, the EU may directly or indirectly goad those countries into the clutches of China and Russia as the EU’s geopolitical rivals in international politics, as pointed out by one cabinet member in the European Commission (Interview 46). GSP, then, would be seen as a zero-sum game. Any gains by the EU in terms of soft or hard power projection would mean some degree of loss in influence as far as the EU’s other geopolitical referents are concerned. In contrast, if the EU lost influence over GSP targets, this loss might mean a geopolitical gain for Russia or China.

In the scholarly discourse, a realist view of GSP manifests itself in the context of Brussels as a ‘global regulatory hegemon’ and laments ‘the ineffectiveness of GSP provisions in fostering regulatory change’ in GSP targets due to the European Commission’s lack of exclusive competence in making decisions regarding preference withdrawals and the European Council’s often dissenting views when it comes to successfully politicising GSP (Bradford 2020, 85).

In sum, in a realist worldview, historically grown power asymmetries between the EU and the global souths are naturalised because the world order is anarchic. Colonial/modern relations are submerged because, for realists, hierarchies between states are normalised and the EU's exertion of geopolitical power over its presumed others, whether effective or not, is necessary and trumps all other exigencies.

Political economy interpretation: The garden is also in the jungle!

Last but not least, a political economy interpretation would emphasise that the GSP regime serves as a particular mode of globalising production by shedding light on the competing political and economic interests shaping the GSP policy. This view would be wary of the garden/jungle metaphor insofar as the garden is itself rooted in the jungle through the neoliberal undercurrents of GSP, betraying its 'development-friendly' face. It would challenge standard liberal and realist interpretations by contending that market interests are the key drivers behind the EU's GSP relations with the global souths.

Historically speaking, GSP was nothing more than a continuation of exploitative, core-periphery economic relations between Western Europe and the GSP targets (Galtung 1973). In contemporary political discourse, The Left in the European Parliament criticises GSP as a mechanism of exploiting workers in the global souths (Interviews 18; 64). For this reason, leftist discourse in the EU often appeals to the EU institutions for stronger and more enforceable conditionalities around international labour standards in GSP. In scholarly discourse, political economy perspectives shed light on how the GSP is subservient to EU commercial interests (Siles-Brügge 2014a). They also expose the role of corporate interests in explaining why the EU imposes sanctions on some GSP countries than others. In the context of political debates over withdrawing preferences from Myanmar following the Rohingya crisis in 2018, EU importers and exporters opposed the politicisation of GSP because, for them, 'maintaining preferential trade relations with Myanmar were primarily motivated by a desire to avoid a disruption of trade and investment links within global value chains (GVCs) so that they could continue competing with Chinese enterprises' (Poletti and Sicurelli 2022, 47). In exposing the political economy motivations behind GSP, this literature tends to take a critical view of the official developmentalist and normative discourses

articulated through GSP. For this reason, a political economy lens, while generative, would place more emphasis on a Eurocentric critique of capitalist forms of power relations or might even privilege an explicitly neocolonial critique of GSP following early criticisms by Galtung (1973), instead of interrogating other forms of hierarchies and without necessarily engaging with questions about the colonial constitution of modern global capitalist relations as understood in decolonial theory.

Towards engaging with and from (other) sites of struggles

By focusing on relations between the global souths and the EU in the context of preferential trade, this dissertation has neglected to explicitly tackle how GSP is implicated into wider geopolitical constellations of increasing ‘great power’ competition. Studying up discourses in Brussels and the implicit colonial/modern logics they underpin, I have also failed to explicitly interrogate the ways in which the colonialities of climate (Sultana 2022), race (Grosfoguel and Georas 2000), and gender (Lugones 2008) impinge upon the lives and subjectivities of peoples for whom GSP supposedly brings EU beneficence. Mindful of these limitations, I gesture towards possible research directions to further ‘unlearn’ and go beyond the EU GSP regime.

The EU, of course, is not the only game in town for the global souths in world commerce. The global souths are also entangled within inter-imperial relations between and among the EU, US, UK, Russia, China, and other global powers as alternative trading interlocutors. Although this is not the main focal point of my intervention, I have shown in this thesis how EU officials stand discursively ready to depoliticise the withdrawal of trade preferences from norm-breaking target countries (e.g., Myanmar) in order to centre its geopolitical prerogatives vis-à-vis China and Russia (see Chapter 6). It would be worthwhile to not only further expose the increasingly realist language asserted by the EU as a ‘geopolitical’ trade power (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2019; Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023; Alcazar III 2024; Danzman and Meunier 2024), but also perhaps more importantly the colonial/modern logics that this so-called ‘geopolitical turn’ sustains in terms of normalising the global souths as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘most-in-need’ entities stuck between the geopolitical imbroglios between the EU ‘garden’ and its jungle-dwelling others in the form of Russia and China. Consider the recent resumption of free trade negotiations between the

Philippines and the EU. During the first ever official visit of an EU Commission President to the Philippines, Ursula von der Leyen implied in her 2023 Manila speech that the archipelago's graduation from GSP+ would 'bring our partnership to the next level' (EC49). As I write this, China's coast guard vessels and maritime militias have intensified their continued harassment and use of threat of force against Filipinos and Philippine vessels in the West Philippine Sea amidst Beijing's expansionist 'ten-dash-line' claims over Southeast Asia's maritime waters (Carpio 2024). In this context, seen from Brussels, how does the GSP policy fit in the context of such contentious maritime relations, considering the EU's strategic interests in maintaining freedom of navigation and keeping international trade routes open in the Indo-Pacific? Seen from Manila, in what ways does the GSP (further) implicate the Philippines in neoliberal trade and investment regimes with 'partners' like the EU, as the Marcos Jr. regime overturns the Duterte regime's formerly anti-Western discourse?

Another fruitful scholarly direction would be to step out of the EU GSP context and critically consider the trade relations of other world powers with the global souths. In what ways do colonial/modern logics—or at the very least imperial logics—get produced and reproduced in the discourses and practices of China, Russia, the UK, and the US? How do they imbue their own systems of trade preferences with meaning?

As a former 'beneficiary' of generalised preferences by the EU and other Western powers, China's position as an alternative 'South-to-South' trading partner stands out at once. In its relations with Africa, China's seductive discourse of exceptionalism 'accentuates a basic but fundamental difference in its relationship with the continent as compared to other actors—notably in a shared history of colonialism and experience as a developing country' (Alden and Large 2011, 22). Yet Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious global infrastructure development project, has been variously characterised as 'colonialism with Chinese characteristics' (Kleven 2019) and as 'an imperialist project' (Meczner and Noršić 2021), poised to consolidate China's economic power and global influence. In what ways do such colonial and imperialist relations 'with Chinese characteristics' manifest in Beijing's preferential trade 'partnerships' with the global souths? How is China today interpreted as a trading power in the global souths? How does China's

imperial/colonial projection of power over maritime Southeast Asia reconfigure the political perceptions of trade policymakers in the region?

In the context of Russia's imperialist war against Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda has staged 'Russia [as] the "standard-bearer" of a Global South that is fed up with Western domination of world affairs' (Frachon 2022). What are the ways in which this vacuous 'anti-imperial' discourse translates to Russia's own granting of generalised preferences to 'developing' countries via the Eurasian Economic Union? How does this framing further obscure the myth of Soviet internationalist solidarity and Russia's colonial past/present (Arystanbek 2022; Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva 2023; Polianichev 2023)?

Like its Global North counterparts, the UK claims to benefit the global souths by preferentially opening its markets to them. After Brexit, the Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) has superseded the EU's GSP regime since 2023. Read against the wider discursive context of 'Global Britain', Anne-Marie Trevelyan, when she was in post as Secretary of State for the Department for International Trade, stated that the DCTS policy serves 'as a major milestone in growing free and fair trade with developing nations' (Department for Business and Trade 2023). Considering the coloniality of 'Global Britain' in Africa (Langan 2023), how do colonial/modern logics operate in London's preferential trade relations with the global souths, as the UK pursues to widen and deepen Commonwealth ties post-Brexit? Why do plantation economies persist in small islands states, and how is DCTS implicated in them?

Like the EU, the US as a trade power is articulating a language of 'partnerships'. In a 2023 speech on global supply chain resilience, Trade Representative Katherine Tai touted that Washington is 'turning the colonial mindset on its head. Instead of supply chains designed to extract from developing economies, our approach is to partner together, where we are all co-owners of different parts of supply chains' (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2023). Ostensibly, one example of 'turning the colonial mindset on its head' is the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Since 2000, AGOA has preferentially opened US markets to sub-Saharan African countries. To be eligible, target countries are obliged to 'establish or make continual progress toward establishing a market-based economy, the rule of law, political pluralism, and the right to

due process’ (Office of the United States Trade Representative n.d.). On top of these obligations, target countries ‘must eliminate barriers to U.S. trade and investment, enact policies to reduce poverty, combat corruption, and protect human rights’ (ibid.). Sounds familiar? Lyakurwa (2018) critiques the Eurocentric and interventionist logics of AGOA, which enable the dispossession of Africans who become deprived of control and ownership of their own land and mineral resources. Echoing African decolonial theorist Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2014, 181–2), in what other ways does a policy like AGOA normalise the ‘relegation of African subjectivity to a perpetual state of becoming’ and stifle the possibilities of ‘creating African futures’?

Rather than undermining my critique of coloniality in the specific context of EU GSP relations, the presence of familiar trade power dynamics elsewhere further amplifies the need to call attention to *all* forms of global hierarchies and colonialities without, of course, flattening the contextual similarities and differences of colonial/modern and imperial forms of domination we strive to critique (South/South Movement 2023). From a decolonial epistemic location, it is possible to aim the arrow of critique at both the usual Euro-American colonial/modern suspects as well as non-Western powers that claim to be ‘anti-colonial’ or ‘anti-imperial’ and yet are themselves entrenched in their own colonial and imperial projects of death, dispossession, subjugation, and expansionism.

To move the critique of policy further and strive towards emancipatory politics, it is also necessary to shift the locus of knowledge-making away from Eurocentric epistemic spaces towards centring geopolitics and corpo-politics (Fúnez-Flores, Díaz Beltrán, and Jupp 2022) through which the coloniality of the EU GSP regime is entangled globally. This shift demands ‘the ethical imperative of thinking “with” others as we seriously engage in inter-epistemic dialogues to advance an ecology of decolonial knowledges and practices born in struggle’ (ibid., 602). Exposing the discursive underpinnings of coloniality as a form of critique is a crucial task, as I have belaboured in this dissertation. However, I caution against dwelling on discursive critiques of GSP at the expense of foregrounding the material conditions of unthinking and unmaking its coloniality in specific contexts across the global souths. Nowhere is this point more pressing, perhaps, than the climate crisis.

Since the European Green Deal's inception, the EU has stressed its commitment to overcoming the climate and planetary crises as an 'existential threat' to itself and the world (EC36). Yet mainstream scholarly and political discourses obsess over 'greening' the EU's common commercial policy rather than fundamentally questioning and undoing its neoliberal, market-making logics of accumulation (EC37; EP19; Orbie, Alcazar III, and Sioen 2022). Central to the persistence of growthism, in the context of EU trade policy, is GSP. The rationale of GSP, however, remains the same: growth through trade. Trading *more* in a 'sustainable' way with the EU benefits the 'developing' world—or so the script goes. This strongly growthist account of GSP conceals the darker side of the EU as a global trade power and how its trade policy coerces, sidesteps, and dispossesses its intended 'beneficiaries' in the global souths (Gegout 2016; Hurt 2003; Langan 2018).

In this context, an emancipatory critique of the EU GSP regime forces us to grapple with the imperative of delinking from hierarchical global economic orders built on colonial difference and engaging geopolitical sites of struggles through which post-growth transitions (Hickel 2021) might be articulated. How can governments in the global souths overcome toxic economic dependencies on preferential market access to the EU? In what ways are growthist discourses around GSP contested in the contexts of the GSP targets themselves? What policy alternatives to GSP might counter the extractive and environmentally injurious export-oriented productive practices in GSP-dependent countries? On the other hand, explicating the geopolitical context that shapes post-growth transitions away from GSP requires that we look into the political and economic commitments of different actors in the global souths. Why do growthist imaginaries of GSP persist? How do we rethink GSP 'from below' in the context of the climate crisis and the renewed call for a New International Economic Order? In what ways do progressive voices articulate their demands on rethinking GSP? Do they end up (re)producing growthist discourses and practices? Who are politically circumvented in this conversation? And how can we take seriously the political interpretations of the 'other' in EU trade policy?

Grasping GSP through the lens of post-growth is an invitation to reframe the focus from studying up EU discourses towards scrutinising the 'material' expressions of concrete power relations as understood and experienced by those on the other end of EU trade policy. This line of inquiry

coheres well with interpretive ways of generating knowledge by ‘taking seriously the interpretations and experiences of the targets of intervention’ (Sabaratnam 2017, 4). Methodologically, it could rely on decolonising strategies in studying world politics in general (Sabaratnam 2011) and EU external trade relations in particular (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). This sensibility aligns with the politics of doing socially engaged research (Tungohan 2018) in terms of recognising and centring the agencies and subjectivities of the very people whose ways of living the EU claims to champion through the technologies of market access, trade-related capacity building, and monitoring missions within GSP. With such politics, we can ‘think of alternatives to the naturalised individualist and colonial way of being promoted by capitalist modernity’s most recent neoliberal expression’ (Fúnez-Flores 2023, 8).

Researching post-growth in the context of the EU GSP regime as an empirical anchor lends itself well to policy ethnography and multi-sited fieldwork. In my view, three possible research contexts stand out: Bangladesh, Cabo Verde, and the Philippines as GSP targets highly exposed to the pull of EU market access (EC20). The trade exposure of Cabo Verde even almost entirely hinges on the EU (EC38)! Under the EBA initiative, Bangladesh has over the years experienced export dependency on the EU, most prominently in the garment sector, thanks to its duty-free, quota-free access to EU markets (EC39). Under GSP+, Cabo Verde and the Philippines are obliged to ratify and implement international conventions on human rights, labour standards, the environment, and good governance in exchange for better market access to the EU. In both contexts, fisheries represent an important sector (EC20). While the global political economy literature has documented the role of EU GSP in shaping the global division of labour in the production of garments and fisheries (Campling 2016; Curran and Nadvi 2015), the ways in which this facet of globalisation are seen and experienced by the targets of GSP remain, however, largely unwritten. Therefore, future interpretive inquiries could study how communities within the garment and fishing economies in certain GSP-dependent countries interpret the political significance of EU interventions through GSP and if/how they subvert their imbrication in the workings of global capitalism. Reframing EU trade policy along these lines ‘moves the analytical focus from the idea—the EU—as the main source of explanation, one inevitably propelling change, to an explanatory position where the acceptance of the idea is more politically relevant than the idea itself’ (Beeson and Stone 2013, 185). In this way, post-growth repositions the locus of enunciation

(Mignolo 2011b) towards the targets of EU trade policy and takes seriously their own political interpretations of (alternatives to) the GSP policy and its intimate connections to the pursuit of ‘ever greater liberalisation’, such as, for instance, in the EU’s trade relations with Indonesia, Mercado Común del Sur, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, to name a few.

Other (and othered) ways to shift the site of interpretation would scrutinise the entangled relationships of GSP to gender and racism. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, I lack the knowledge claims to engage in a more explicit and more sustained manner with these questions given the methodological limits of my project and the discursive closures of studying GSP upwards. Again, the partnership discourse acts as an interpretive shutter that blinds us from seeing GSP along the lines of gendered and racialised hierarchies. This is so because EU trade policy is engrained as inherently ‘good’, not least in promoting and policing certain gender-just and anti-racist conventions through GSP: namely, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1969), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981).

Critical perspectives would foreground feminist (Liebowitz 2008; Hannah, Roberts, and Trommer 2021), decolonial feminist (Lugones 2010; Icaza 2017) and queer (Gore 2021) perspectives when it comes to the global governance of trade. Crucially, these approaches would challenge the neoliberal hegemony of GSP over the feminisation of workers *by the millions*, typically across various garment economies in the global souths, who are often subjected to horrific working conditions and irresponsible global value chains while serving EU markets (Clean Clothes Campaign 2020; 2021). At the same time, we must attend to the ways in which the EU’s external promotion of gender norms through GSP or trade in general may ‘reinforce ideas of “power over” already entrenched in foreign policy practice, rather than challenging the dominant approach to foreign policy making which runs counter to feminist ethics’ (Guerrina, Haastrup, and Wright 2023, 503). Queering GSP would elucidate the political significance of trade preferences for queer people, especially since organisations like the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association have been more vocal in the clamour for more civil society engagement within GSP reform dialogues (ILGA Europe 2021). Queer perspectives would invite us to look

again, and harder, at the EU's championing of sexual minority rights overseas (Thiel 2019; Sloomaeckers 2020) and the ways in which this activism may end up flattening situated knowledges and histories and, thus, replicate the oppressive power structures it claims to dismantle.

Aside from gendering and queering GSP, I stress the urgency of problematising the complicity of generalised preferences in sustaining racial hierarchies in the global political economy, not least through the lenses of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983) and underdevelopment (Rodney 1972). Reframing the already familiar GSP epithet: 'The EU-self rescues racialised bodies from privation and lifts them up through preferential trade'. In other words, the world of GSP is built on the back of 'raced markets', which as an interpretive frame of analysis allows us to 'examine how race functions in structural and agential ways, integrally producing and being reproduced by our global political economy' (Tilley and Shilliam 2018, 542). Explicitly engaging with race and racism in emancipatory projects around GSP cannot be emphasised enough since Eurocentrism enshrouds the logic of racial differences between the EU and the targets of GSP whose implicit racialisation justifies the latter's incessant need for EU tutelage and intervention through trade (Alcazar III, Nessel, and Orbie 2023). Here, we must bear in mind that 'it is not sufficient to show how race is a fabrication, but that we also need the detailed study of how it operates in practice, as it is from there that we can be reminded of the noninevitability and contingency' (Rutazibwa 2020b, 226). In future research, engaging with the global political economy literature (cf. Bhabra 2021a; Antunes de Oliveira and Kvangraven 2023) on the racialised and colonial/modern constitution of our global economy via GSP is a fruitful way forward. Speaking as an interpretivist and given the question of (trans)disciplinarity with which my doctoral research wrestles across policy studies, European Studies, and International Relations, I consider the critique of coloniality I have advocated here as a way to depart from the theoretical shortcomings and positivist proclivities of existing (global) political economy approaches to GSP in the EU trade policy canon. Indeed, Fúnez-Flores contends that decolonial theory articulates:

a multifaceted geopolitical interpretation that transcends the political economy perspectives (e.g., world polity, world-systems, and Marxian theory). [...] It is not to say that politics and economics are no longer important; rather, it is the centrality of Eurocentric analyses that are questioned. A political economy paradigm, for instance, overemphasises economic class at the expense of the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality, and the way the latter set of categories are colonially configured. (Fúnez-Flores 2022, 8–9)

Before we can speak and think about GSP beyond coloniality, we must first make legible the coloniality of GSP. To this end, I have unmasked the colonial/modern logics that permeate EU-centric discourses around interdependence, global governance, and international partnerships in GSP relations. This is a necessary but certainly insufficient step towards knowing GSP, otherwise. The implications of this interpretation to policymaking and knowledge generation are at least two-fold. On the one hand, we need to take seriously pluriversal alternatives to GSP to overcome its coloniality. These alternatives would entail political commitments not only by the EU but also by the global souths themselves in unlearning and challenging the growthist, developmentalist and colonial/modern logics inscribed in GSP. On the other, we need more socially engaged work to expose both the discursive *and* material dimensions of coloniality in the global souths across distinct geopolitical contexts and to engage explicitly in the critique of perpetuating climate-related, racialised and gendered hierarchies through GSP. Such interpretive manoeuvres—always situated within concrete sites of struggles—cohere with unmaking scholarly, historical and political imaginaries by the EU about the global souths in a world where colonial relations remain far from being a creature of days past.

Annexes

Annex A: List of interviews

Reference	Interlocutor	Date	Location
Interview 0	Ex-GSP Policy Official, DG Trade, European Commission	5-Nov-20	Online
Interview 1	Co-Father of GSP, European External Action Service	18-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 2	Trade Policy Manager, European peak business association	18-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 3	Trade Adviser, European Trade Union Confederation	19-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 4	Trade Policy Manager, European peak business association	20-Oct-21	Online
Interview 5	President, sector-specific European business group	20-Oct-21	Online
Interview 6	Policy Official, European Commission	21-Oct-21	Online
Interview 7	GSP Policy Official, DG Trade, European Commission	22-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 8	Senior Policy Officer, sector-specific European business group	26-Oct-21	Online
Interview 9	Policy Official, European Commission	26-Oct-21	Online
Interview 10	Trade Expert, European peak business association	26-Oct-21	Online
Interview 11	Trade Diplomat, EuroMed 9 member state	28-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 12	Policy Expert, Civil society organisation	29-Oct-21	Brussels
Interview 13	Policy Official, European Commission	29-Oct-21	Online
Interview 14	Policy Official, European Commission	18-Nov-21	Online
Interview 15	Development Expert, European think-tank	22-Nov-21	Online
Interview 16	Socialists & Democrats Political Adviser, European Parliament	23-Nov-21	Online
Interview 17	Trade Diplomat, New Hanseatic League member state	24-Nov-21	Brussels
Interview 18	The Left Political Adviser, European Parliament	25-Nov-21	Online
Interview 19	Sustainability Officer, sector-specific European business group	26-Nov-21	Brussels
Interview 20	Public Affairs Director, sector-specific European business group	26-Nov-21	Online
Interview 21	Trade Policy Manager, sector-specific European business group	29-Nov-21	Online
Interview 22	Maria Arena, Human Rights Chair and Socialists & Democrats member, European Parliament	29-Nov-21	Online
Interview 23	Trade Diplomat, Visegrád Group member state	1-Dec-21	Online
Interview 24	Trade Diplomat, Benelux member state	1-Dec-21	Online
Interview 25	Trade Diplomat, EuroMed 9 member state	2-Dec-21	Online
Interview 26	Trade Diplomat, Benelux member state	2-Dec-21	Online
Interview 27	International Trade Committee Policy Adviser, European Parliament	10-Dec-21	Online
Interview 28	Trade Diplomat, Visegrád Group member state	15-Dec-21	Online
Interview 29	Trade Diplomat, Visegrád Group member state	17-Jan-22	Online
Interview 30	Trade Diplomat, New Hanseatic League member state	5-Apr-22	Online
Interview 31	Trade Lawyer, sector-specific European business group	20-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 32	GSP Policy Official, DG Trade, European Commission	21-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 33	Greens Political Adviser, European Parliament	21-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 34	European People's Party Political Adviser, European Parliament	21-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 35	Trade Policy Officer, European development organisation	21-Apr-22	Online

Interview 36	European Conservatives & Reformists Political Adviser, European Parliament	22-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 37	Policy Officer, sector-specific European business group	25-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 38	Socialists & Democrats Political Adviser, European Parliament	26-Apr-22	Brussels
Interview 39	Policy Officer, Democracy non-government organisation	13-May-22	Online
Interview 40	Policy Official, European Commission	17-May-22	Brussels
Interview 41	Trade Diplomat, Three Seas Initiative member state	18-May-22	Brussels
Interview 42	Co-Father of GSP, DG Trade, European Commission	18-May-22	Brussels
Interview 43	Marco Campomenosi, Identity & Democracy member, European Parliament	19-May-22	Brussels
Interview 44	Trade Diplomat, Visegrád Group member state	19-May-22	Brussels
Interview 45	Claudio Francavilla, Senior EU Advocate, Human Rights Watch	19-May-22	Brussels
Interview 46	Cabinet Member, VP Values & Transparency, European Commission	20-May-22	Brussels
Interview 47	Trade Policy Manager, sector-specific European business group	20-May-22	Brussels
Interview 48	Policy Analyst, European Parliament	23-May-22	Brussels
Interview 49	Chair, sector-specific European business group	23-May-22	Brussels
Interview 50	Policy Official, European Commission	24-May-22	Brussels
Interview 51	Trade Diplomat, New Hanseatic League member state	24-May-22	Brussels
Interview 52	Trade Diplomat, Baltic Assembly member state	24-May-22	Brussels
Interview 53	Trade Diplomat, New Hanseatic League member state	27-May-22	Brussels
Interview 54	Trade Policy Expert, non-profit organisation	27-May-22	Brussels
Interview 55	Trade Diplomat, Baltic Assembly member state	30-May-22	Brussels
Interview 56	Policy Coordinator, European Parliament	30-May-22	Brussels
Interview 57	Policy Official, European Commission	31-May-22	Brussels
Interview 58	Policy Adviser, sector-specific European business group	31-May-22	Brussels
Interview 59	Policy Official, European Commission	31-May-22	Brussels
Interview 60	Judith Kirton-Darling, Deputy Secretary General, industriALL	31-May-22	Online
Interview 61	Trade Diplomat, EuroMed 9 member state	27-Sep-22	Brussels
Interview 62	Trade Diplomat, Baltic Assembly member state	27-Sep-22	Brussels
Interview 63	Trade Diplomat, EuroMed 9 member state	28-Sep-22	Brussels
Interview 64	The Left Political Adviser, European Parliament	29-Sep-22	Brussels

Annex B: List of archival sources

Historical Archives of the European Commission, Brussels, Belgium

HAEC BAC 134/1987 No. 145/2: n.d., Commonwealth and Generalised Preferences.

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Annex D: Guide to interviewing

My research project employed a series of open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted throughout a period of data generation mainly from October 2021 until September 2022. Multi-sited fieldwork involving elite interviews and archival work in Brussels took place in two phases. The first phase happened during the fall semester of 2021; this was co-funded by the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES). The second phase happened in the spring and fall semesters of 2022.

My research participants included civil servants from various services of the European Commission, parliamentarians and political advisors at the European Parliament, trade diplomats from different EU member states, representatives from Brussels-based civil society organisations, and businesspeople from sector-specific and peak associations.

Each interview lasted typically for about 60 minutes. Due to covid-19 constraints, some interviews took place online. Since my project relied on snowballing, I asked all research participants, at the end of interviews, to recommend people I could contact for my research. I produced field notes and interview summaries within 48 hours following a given interview. Given time constraints, I transcribed all recorded interviews post-fieldwork.

Broadly speaking, I treated the questions listed here as guide questions during interviews with a view to explicating the meaning-making behind the EU GSP policy in a relational sense (Fujii 2017). In other words, I did not think of open-ended interviews as a meandering exercise but rather as generative conversations to uncover how the people behind EU trade policymaking interpret the political significance of the GSP regime. I practised a great deal of flexibility when it came to the contours of questioning and generally let my interlocutors ‘speak’ about things they considered relevant. In this way, I strove to engage in ‘working relationships’ to speak about GSP, rather than establishing ‘rapport’ (Fujii 2017). Here, rapport implies proximity or closeness in view or disposition that in many ways was/is problematic given my positionality.

Since semi-structured interviews follow an open-ended and conversational format, I used probes to further explore my interlocutors' insights in greater depth when answering the guide questions. I specified some probes prior to the interviews. Other probes emerged impromptu in response to what my interlocutors shared.

1. Please describe your professional background.
2. Tell me more about your role at [name of organisation]. How does it fit within the organisation?
3. How does your work relate to EU trade policy in general and GSP in particular?
4. What is the significance of GSP to you, to your work, to your organisation, or to your country?
5. In the past decade or so, the EU has organised three cycles of GSP reform processes. In your view, what remains the most pressing policy concerns? What policy innovations do you consider the most relevant?
 - Integration in global value chains
 - Growth, development, diversification
 - Focusing on the 'most in need'
 - Promoting EU values through trade
 - Trade sanctions, full withdrawals, partial withdrawals
 - More monitoring and dialoguing with beneficiaries
 - Increased civil society participation
6. When the EU says 'enhanced engagement' is needed with beneficiaries, what does it mean? Who needs to engage more with whom? And to what end?
7. EBA privileges have been partially withdrawn from Cambodia due to 'severe and systematic violations of human rights' there, while we don't see a similar action in the case of Myanmar. What is the difference between the situations in Cambodia and Myanmar? How can we make sense of this?
8. Finally, what is your vision for the future for GSP/GSP+/EBA?
9. Is there anyone you would recommend I interview in addition?

Annex E: Consent form sample

Research title: Everything but Arms: Interpreting EU preferential trade policy

Researcher: Antonio Salvador M. Alcazar III

Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations
Central European University, Vienna, Austria

The aim of this research is to understand the meaning-making behind EU preferential trade policy from the perspective of those involved in producing it. Participants will be asked to take part in interviews about their experiences and thoughts on the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences. This study may involve subsequent interview sessions to further explore themes and unaddressed questions from the first interview.

1. The participant consents to:

Please initial each box.

a. being audio-recorded for the purpose of transcribing the interview.	
b. the use of direct quotes, attributed to my name, in research outputs.	
c. the use of my anonymised interview data, including quotes, in research outputs.	
d. archiving my anonymised interview data for future research.	

2. The researcher will use the interview data for the purpose of writing a doctoral dissertation, which will be publicly available on CEU's Electronic Thesis Database and may be the basis of academic publications. The interview data will be kept confidential and may not be shared with anyone other than the researcher and their supervisory panel and examination committee. All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants.
3. While the researcher believes that there are no perceived or real risks associated with participating in this study, the participant may communicate to the researcher what risks and protections might matter to them at any given time. Possible advantages from participation include contributing to the interpretivist/critical scholarship on EU trade policy.
4. The participant can withdraw from the study at any given time without any explanations.
5. This study has undergone ethics assessment in accordance with the Central European University's Ethical Research Policy (<https://acro.ceu.edu/ethical-research>). The relevant Data Protection Policy can be found at: <https://documents.ceu.edu/documents/p-1611-2v1705>.
6. In case of questions about the study, please contact the researcher via <Alcazar_Antonio@phd.ceu.edu>. In case of concerns regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the CEU Ethical Research Committee via <bordase@ceu.edu>.
7. The participant confirms having read and understood this consent form, was able to ask questions that were answered adequately, and partakes in the study voluntarily based on the given information.
8. The participant has received a copy of this form.

Participant's name and signature:

Researcher's name and signature:

Date:

Annex F: Notes on transcribing and coding interviews

Texts and ‘text analogues’ serve as the bread and butter of interpretive students, not least (critical) discourse analysts. For this reason, I decided to fully transcribe my interviews. I did so without outsourcing this research task to third party service providers. Though incredibly tedious and laborious, transcribing interviews on my own certainly paid off. This choice did not prove to be a thankless job as it worked as a painstaking way of ‘breaking in’ the data.

Post-fieldwork, I dedicated eight weeks to documenting all my interviews. In transcribing them, I relied on the Dictation tool in Microsoft Word to convert audio files to textual files. Then, I worked with this raw textual data as a basis for my transcriptions. As I replayed and carefully listened to each and every recording, I checked the text against delivery to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions. I made corrections where needed and properly formatted the text in the process.

For some interviews, I kept no recordings because some interlocutors did not consent to being recorded or chose to speak with me only to offer background information for my study. In place of transcriptions, I created summaries and background notes for these unrecorded conversations based on my interview notes. I made best efforts to write up the summaries and background notes within a few days after a given interview.

All in all, I managed to generate 52 transcriptions, 11 summaries, and 2 background notes. All 65 texts feature the following meta-data:

- Reference: [Interview #]
- Organisation: [research participant’s affiliation]
- Role: [research participant’s job title]
- Location: [researcher’s location]
- Date: [date of the interview]
- Time: [start and end time of the interview]
- Mode: [in-person or online]
- Audio-recording: [yes or no]
- Direct attribution: [yes or no]
- Anonymous attribution: [yes or no]
- Archive: [yes or no]
- Recruitment: [purposive or snowballing]

- Data generated: [interview transcript, interview summary or background notes]

For the purpose of coding the data, the texts remained as they are. Only for the purpose of data storage are the texts duly anonymised.

I followed an emergent approach to coding my data for analysis. I organised texts with the help of the NVivo software. I used NVivo not in the spirit of analysing large-N data. Instead, my coding process aimed to explicate meaning with a view to categorising and making textual data meaningful. To this end, my analysis of coded data aligned with an emergent coding process (Elliott 2018; Cecchini 2023). In lieu of rigid and pre-made coding protocols, I had three cycles of coding, which meant that I went through the interview data thrice. First, I worked through the data in an open-ended manner to discern tentative concepts, categories, and themes. Then, I re-engaged with the data with a more focused interpretation of emerging concepts, categories, and themes that stood out for me. In the final coding cycle, I made axial connections within my coding hierarchy by analysing how recurring concepts, categories, and themes relate with each other. I would work and rework this sense-making throughout the research process. The axial relationships that became apparent to me greatly aided in writing up Chapters 5 and 6.

Annex G: CEU ethics self-assessment

Checklist on Ethical Issues in Research
[Annex 3 to the Ethical Policy on Research]

This checklist is intended as a guide for CEU students/researchers in planning, designing and carrying research, and for applying approval to the Ethical Research Committee. The numbers in brackets indicate the relevant section of the Guidelines on Ethical Research. In case applying for approval from the Ethical Research Committee, provide explanatory answers that enable the Committee to assess whether the Guidelines were followed.

A. General information

1. Project name/Title of thesis/dissertation:

Brussels's burden: (Un)making the global souths in the European Union's preferential trade policy

2. Name of Applicant:

Antonio Salvador Mesalucha Alcazar III

3. Contact information of applicant:

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4. Department/Research Center:

Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations
Central European University, Vienna, Austria

5. Research Supervisor:

Thilo Daniel Bodenstein

6. Supervisor's contact information:

bodensteint@ceu.edu

7. Date by which a decision on this application is required in order that the project can proceed as planned, if approval is required:

N/A

8. Expected date of completion:

Data generation: December 2022; Dissertation write-up: A/Y 2022–2023

9. Abstract of the dissertation:

[redacted]

B. Funding

10. Sources, researchers' and their organisation's financial interests and ethical issues in case of external funding:

University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES)

UACES Scholarship 2021 for Postgraduate Students Conducting Essential Fieldwork

Grant amount: £1,500

I declare no conflict of interest or ethical issues arising from this external financial support. UACES has no influence over the conduct, analysis and/or dissemination of my research.

C. Participants

[If the research does not involve human subjects, go to section D.]

11. Does the study involve human subjects, and how?

[Who will participate in the research? How will the subject/respondent group be chosen, what sampling techniques will be deployed? In which ways the participants will be involved? (2.1)]

Research participants include civil servants from various services of the European Commission, parliamentarians and political advisors at the European Parliament, trade diplomats from different EU member states, representatives from Brussels-based civil society organisations, and businesspeople from sector-specific and peak associations.

Participants have been chosen on the basis of their GSP-oriented bureaucratic roles, parliamentary work, and trade policy advocacy. This is determined by consulting publicly available organisational charts, plenary session proceedings, meeting minutes, advocacy papers, etc.

I used snowballing to recruit research participants; I asked my interlocutors, at the end of all first interview encounters, to recommend people I could contact for my research.

I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews, either virtually or in-person.

12. Are there potential benefits and hazards for the participants?

[Are there risks to the subject entailed by involvement in the research? Have procedures been established for the care and protection of subjects? Will the participants be informed of possible risks and hazards?] (2.2 – 3.4)

There may be minimal perceived risks for research participants, given the nature of critical inquiry in my research on politically sensitive questions around trade and non-trade issues in EU trade policy. Consequences of participation may include political repercussions (e.g., compromising ongoing sensitive policy work) or economic reprisal (e.g., career setback, demotion, job loss).

However, I consider these perceived risks to be minimal as the intended research participants deal directly with politically sensitive questions around GSP as part of their official roles. Nevertheless, to mitigate these perceived risks, I clarified during fieldwork that research participants have the option to decline taking part in the study or to withdraw completely from the study until a given date. In addition, I have taken all possible measures to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, including:

- Restricting employer access to fieldwork materials
- Keeping all copies of fieldwork materials in secure locations, both offline and online
- Safeguarding interview transcripts and any other documentation that may contain identifying information
- Ensuring all digital data are encrypted and password-protected
- More measures on securing confidentiality and anonymity are discussed under section 18 below.

13. Does the research involve any risks or pose danger to the researcher?

[If yes, what procedures will be adopted to minimize the risks? Have the health and safety guidelines relevant to the area and character of the research been consulted and implemented?] (4)

The research may pose health risks to the researcher and participants. To mitigate these risks, I followed all possible measures during fieldwork, such as:

- Strictly following all relevant covid-19 protocols en route to and from, and while conducting research in, Brussels
- Securing an EU Digital COVID Certificate and taking covid tests as often as possible
- Conducting interviews in open and well-ventilated spaces

14. Will all procedures ensuring that consent is informed be followed?

[Including the possibility for withdrawing consent] (5.1)

The research study relies on a written informed consent process based on ‘Oxford’ guidelines (<https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent#collapse281091>), including the possibility to refuse or withdraw consent. This consent process is deemed suitable for conducting research with elites.

15. Are the recruitment procedures well planned, and risks of coercion considered?

[Is there any sense in which subjects might be “obliged” to participate – or are volunteers being recruited? Does the participation of research involve financial or other remuneration?] (5.2)

Participation in the study is voluntary. There is no financial or any other type of remuneration for participants.

16. Does the research involve incompetent adults, children, prisoners, other vulnerable groups or contexts where obtaining consent is impossible (i.e. public context, groups)?

[Which “consent”-procedures will be applied instead?] (5.3 – 5.5)

No.

17. Does the research involve deception?

[This will not be applicable to many studies. In case deception of participants is involved: how is the impossibility to employ alternative non-deceiving method of research justified? How is the deception integral to the viability of research? Will debriefing be employed and how will the participant's reactions influence the use of the data obtained?] (5.6 – 6)

No.

18. Will confidentiality and anonymity be secured? (8)

I have taken all possible measures to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants. During interviews, I consulted all participants on whether they preferred our interviews to be attributed directly or anonymously. I elicited this information explicitly through a written informed consent form that participants could either complete online or sign on paper. Following CEU policy, I will not publish or make available any details that would allow individuals to be identified by anybody not involved in the research unless explicit consent is given by the individuals concerned.

To secure confidentiality and anonymity during and after the course of data generation and analysis, I have anonymised all field notes and interview materials by:

- omitting personal identifiers
- keeping contact details separate from transcripts
- assigning a code to the information generated with each interlocutor
- keeping the interview codes away from the dataset (i.e., in a physical paper notebook backed up on a secure digital file)
- controlling access to the data coding key
- storing video/audio recordings on a secure digital platform (e.g., institutional access on OneDrive)
- backing up all written materials on a secure digital platform (e.g., institutional access on OneDrive)
- sharing anonymised transcripts with close colleagues and with editors on request
- justifying why it is necessary to anonymise in future publications (other than the dissertation project)

19. Will data protection and storage requirements be followed? (8)

I follow data protection and storage requirements in accordance with applicable measures under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation.

20. Are there any plans for future use of the data beyond those already described?

Careful consideration is given to the consequences of storing transcripts and other research materials in digital repositories. As I lose my CEU institutional access to OneDrive, all research materials may instead be kept as hard copies after my doctoral studies at CEU. Future access to these anonymised research data may be jointly decided by the researcher and the supervisory committee.

D. Other Aspects:

21. Dissemination of findings:

[What is the anticipated use of the data, forms of publication and dissemination of findings etc? In areas where information is jointly owned by participants as co-researchers attention should be paid to how they want to use the data.]

During interviews, I clarified that the data generated would be used primarily for the purpose of writing my dissertation, which will be publicly available on CEU's Electronic Thesis Database or may be published as a future monograph or in the form of journal articles and other publications.

22. Have you considered how to ensure that ethics considerations are reviewed as the project proceeds?

[This is particularly relevant for projects that go on over a longer time period.]

Throughout the duration of the project, I endeavoured to ask all research participants about their preferences around confidentiality and anonymity. I have followed all possible measures to respect these preferences. During interviews, I carefully noted when my research participants wished to share sensitive information with me off-the-record. During the transcription and analysis stages, I ensured to keep this information duly off-the-record.

23. Is there any other information, which you think would be relevant to the reviewers', or your own, consideration of the ethical issues raised in this documentation?

No.

DECLARATION

The information supplied above is to the best of my knowledge and belief accurate.

Signature of Applicant: Antonio Salvador M. Alcazar III

Submitted: 11 October 2021

Updated: 27 September 2023

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Certificate of Attendance: Research Ethics for the CIVICA Network, Hertie School, Online training series, 9 and 16 December 2020 and 21 and 28 January 2021, Instructor: Dr. Noora Arajärvi, issued in Berlin, 26 November 2020.

Certificate of Completion, Panel on Research Ethics: Navigating the ethics of human research, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE), issued on 11 January 2021.

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