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EVALUATING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE WTO FROM A NEOLIBERAL PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract: *The foundation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 marked a significant transformation in the global trade regime, institutionalizing a set of rules that reflected the principles of neoliberalism. This paper critically evaluates the formation of the WTO through the lens of neoliberal economic thought, analyzing how its institutional design, rules, and dispute settlement mechanisms embody neoliberal ideals. By examining the historical context, key actors, and the transition from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to the WTO, this study explores whether the WTO's creation reinforced global economic liberalization or introduced contradictions within the neoliberal paradigm. The paper also considers critiques of the WTO from both proponents and opponents of neoliberalism, offering insights into the broader implications of neoliberal governance in international trade.*

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Keywords: *WTO, neoliberalism, GATT, international trade policy, global governance, economic liberalization, dispute settlement*

DTÖ'NÜN KURULUŞUNUN NEOLİBERAL BİR PERSPEKTİFTEN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

Öz: *Dünya Ticaret Örgütü'nün (DTÖ) 1995'te kurulması, küresel ticaret rejiminde önemli bir dönüşümü işaret ederek, neoliberalizmin ilkelerini yansıtan bir dizi kuralı kurumsallaştırdı. Bu makale, DTÖ'nün oluşumunu neoliberal ekonomik düşünce merceğinden eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirerek, kurumsal tasarımının, kurallarının ve anlaşmazlıkların halli mekanizmalarının neoliberal idealleri nasıl somutlaştırdığını analiz etmektedir. Tarihsel bağlamı, kilit aktörleri ve Gümrük Tarifeleri ve Ticaret Genel Anlaşması'ndan (GATT) DTÖ'ye geçişi inceleyerek, bu çalışma DTÖ'nün kuruluşunun küresel ekonomik liberalizasyonu güçlendirip güçlendirmedini veya neoliberal paradigma içinde çelişkiler getirip getirmediğini araştırmaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, hem neoliberalizmin savunucuları hem de karşıtları tarafından DTÖ'ye yönelik eleştirileri ele alarak, neoliberal yönetişimin uluslararası ticaretteki daha geniş etkilerine ilişkin içgörüler sunmaktadır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *DTÖ, neoliberalizm, GATT, uluslararası ticaret politikası, küresel yönetişim, ekonomik liberalizasyon, anlaşmazlıkların halli*

Introduction

The United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, United States in July 1944 was a historical turning point that laid the foundations of the post-war international economic order. At the conference, 44 countries, primarily the United States and the United Kingdom, designed a new international institutional structure with the aim of ensuring economic stability, limiting exchange rate fluctuations, encouraging trade and balancing capital movements. In this way, the search for a global order that emerged after World War II was shaped by the effort to compensate for the devastation caused by the Great Depression of the 1930s and the protectionist, introverted economic policies of the war period.

This economic structure includes three basic institutions: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD - later the World Bank Group), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Trade Organization (ITO). The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which was considered as a temporary replacement for the ITO and signed in 1947, has gradually transformed into a regime that determines the basic norms of the multilateral trading system.

From a neoliberal perspective, these international institutions were established after Bretton Woods with the plans of John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White. The aim was to establish a liberal international economic system in the international system. Although these institutions were initially designed within the framework of Keynesian norms, with an approach that recognized the regulatory role of the state in economic life and prioritized social welfare. However, with the transformation that took place from the 1970s onwards, these international economic organizations gradually became the basic building blocks of the neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal paradigm, which began to be effective at a global level from the 1980s onwards, emphasized principles such as the exaltation of the free market mechanism, minimizing state intervention and liberalizing capital movements.

The period between the two world wars was seen as an experiment in protectionism, competitive devaluation and capital controls, and then GATT was signed in 1947.¹ For example, after the passage of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, the United States (US) increased its tariffs from 38% to 52%, and in response, the US's trading partners imposed retaliatory trade restriction.² The increase in protectionist measures created a domino effect, and before the end of World War II, the United Nations (UN) and the IMF were designed to manage international relations and monetary and exchange rates; and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was envisaged to promote reconstruction and economic development.³ During these negotiations, the statement of H. Cabot Lodge, former US delegate to the UN, almost summed up the zeitgeist at that time: "This organization is created to keep you from going to hell. It- is not created to take you to heaven."⁴

In the post-war period, the regulation of international trade was seen as at least as important as other topics, and the establishment of the International Trade Organization (ITO) was envisaged for this purpose. In this context, first of all, GATT was signed by 23 countries on October 30, 1947 and GATT entered into force on January 1, 1948. On the other hand, the Havana Conference started on November 21, 1947 and the ITO Charter was adopted in Havana in March 1948.⁵

In the following process, the Havana Charter had to be approved by the legislative bodies of the countries that were parties to the agreement in order to enter into force. However, the decision of the United

1 Hoekman, B., & Kostecki, M. (2009). *The political economy of the world trading system: WTO and beyond* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press; Mavroidis, P. C. (2005). *The GATT: A commentary*. Oxford University Press.

2 Irwin, D. A. (2011). *Peddling protectionism: Smoot-Hawley and the Great Depression*. Princeton University Press.

3 Hoekman, B. M., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2016). *The World Trade Organization: Law, economics, and politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

4 Heinbecker, P. (2005). *Can the World be Governed?* Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy and Centre for International Governance Innovation. <https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/canadaintheworldmcgillfeb16-2005.pdf>

5 WTO. (2025). The GATT years: From Havana to Marrakesh. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact4_e.htm

States government not to submit the Havana Charter to the American Congress for approval caused the ITO Charter to never enter into force.⁶ After the stillbirth of the International Trade Organization, GATT, which was seen as a temporary agreement, became the basic agreement regulating international trade and eventually became an international institution. At this point, it would be appropriate to touch upon the basic principles of GATT. The first basic tenet is the “Most Favored Nation (MFN) Principle” and in short, it states that a country must give the same trade advantage to all other members as it gives to one WTO member. The second principle is “the National Treatment”, which states that foreign goods should be treated the same as domestic goods in the domestic market. Thirdly, the WTO emphasizes more open, predictable and transparent trade. Fourthly, there is special treatment for the least developed member countries.

Since the GATT entered into force in 1948, several trade rounds⁷ have been carried out. When these rounds are examined in general, it is seen that in the first years, the focus was more on tariff (customs duty) reductions, while in the following years, issues such as the Anti-Dumping Agreement, non-tariff barriers, services and intellectual property rights came to the agenda.

In 1995, GATT 1947 remained essentially the same but was replaced by GATT 1994, which was a legally different regulation, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) was established as an international

6 Hoekman, B. M., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2016). *The World Trade Organization: Law, economics, and politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

7 From 1947 to 1994, the GATT served as the foundation for a series of eight multilateral negotiation rounds aimed at liberalizing global trade and reinforcing a rules-based system. The early rounds—Geneva (1947), Annecy (1949), Torquay (1950–51), and the second Geneva Round (1956)—primarily focused on reducing tariffs among participating countries. Subsequent rounds introduced broader objectives: the Dillon Round (1960–62) initiated discussions on the impact of the European Economic Community; the Kennedy Round (1964–67) incorporated anti-dumping measures; and the Tokyo Round (1973–79) sought to address non-tariff barriers and improve trade rules through plurilateral codes. The last one, the Uruguay Round (1986–94), expanded the agenda to include services and intellectual property, ultimately paving the way for the establishment of the WTO in 1995. In the post-WTO era, the Doha Development Round—launched in 2001—represented an ambitious effort to prioritize development concerns in global trade talks, but progress has stalled due to deep disagreements among members, especially over agricultural reform and market access.

organization to oversee the implementation of the GATT and related trade agreements.⁸

To sum up, the establishment of the WTO was a turning point in the international economic and trading system. The WTO aimed to remove/reduce barriers to trade and to promote economic liberalization, thus institutionalizing legally binding rules on this issue. In this sense, many scholars argue that the WTO represents or includes the basic principles of neoliberalism, such as free markets, global economic integration, and minimum state intervention.⁹ Based on this, this paper aims to evaluate the formation of the WTO from a neoliberal perspective and to address the extent to which its structure and policies are compatible with neoliberal principles.

Neoliberalism and Global Trade Governance

Neoliberalism, as an economic and political philosophy, advocates the efficiency of market mechanisms and the reduction of government intervention in economic affairs. In International Political Economy (IPE), neoliberal institutionalism argues that international organizations such as the WTO facilitate cooperation and economic efficiency by providing rules and dispute resolution mechanisms. In addition, the WTO is seen as one of the most notable propagators of neoliberal policies in the global trading system. This section attempts to outline the basic principles of Neoliberalism and their applications in global trade governance.

8 Barton, J. H., Goldstein, J. L., Josling, T. E., & Steinberg, R. H. (2006). *The evolution of the trade regime: Politics, law, and economics of the GATT and the WTO*. Princeton University Press.

9 Chomsky, N. (1999). *Profit over people: Neoliberalism and global order*. Seven Stories Press; Wilkinson, R. (2000). *Multilateralism and the World Trade Organisation: The architecture and extension of international trade regulation*. Routledge; Narlikar, A. (2005). *The World Trade Organization: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press; Sell, S. K. (2010). The rise and rule of a trade-based strategy: Historical institutionalism and the international regulation of intellectual property. *Review of International Political Economy*, 17(4), 762–788; Lang, A. (2011). *World trade law after neoliberalism: Re-imagining the global economic order*. Oxford University Press.

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, which emerged in the 20th century as a reinterpretation of classical liberal thought, has been accepted as an economic and political system of thought. Scholars such as Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek advocate for the state's intervention in economic activities to be minimized and for open markets. In this context, according to Neoliberalism, the role of the state is limited to facilitating the functioning of markets and protecting private property rights, while the aim is to distribute resources in the most efficient way in the free market.¹⁰

In addition to the abovementioned issues, it is possible to list other basic principles of Neoliberalism such as privatization, financial discipline and curbing inflation, deregulation, liberalization of foreign trade and capital movements, entrepreneurship, encouragement of competition and flexibility of labor markets. However, it is not possible to assert that all of these basic principles are directly related to the global trade system.

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From this perspective, this paper sets forth that Neoliberalism, which can be claimed to have gone beyond an economic and political model, is also considered to be one of the cornerstones of the global governance system. By considering the dynamics in the global political economy, it can be stated that while global economic and trade policies were being shaped within a neoliberal framework, international economic organizations have also played critical roles in the spread of neoliberal ideology. Within the framework of the Washington Consensus, first put forward by British economist John Williamson in 1989¹¹, international economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank Group have proposed policy prescriptions that encourage neoliberal reforms to developing countries, and the WTO has contributed to the expansion of free trade by determining the rules of the multilateral trading system.¹²

10 Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

11 Irwin, D. A., & Ward, O. (2021). What is the "Washington Consensus"? *Peterson Institute for International Economics*. <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economic-issues-watch/what-washington-consensus>

12 Stiglitz, J. E. (2002). *Globalization and its discontents*. W. W. Norton & Company.

Global Trade Governance

The global trade system can be briefly defined as the sum of the boards that regulate the flow of goods, services and capital between countries and the international economic organizations that set these rules. The multilateral trade system in question aims to conduct international trade in an open, transparent and fair manner. This system includes international economic organizations such as the WTO, IMF and the World Bank Group, as well as states, multinational corporations and regional trade blocs such as the EU, USMCA and ASEAN.

According to the neoliberal understanding, the global trade system aims to strengthen market mechanisms and reduce/remove barriers to international trade. In this context, the WTO was established on January 1, 1995, following the conclusion of the Uruguay Round on December 15, 1993, and its formal adoption at the Marrakesh meeting on April 15, 1994.¹³ In this context, the establishment of the WTO has become a turning point in the process of institutionalization of the neoliberal economic order.

It can easily be stated that the most important institutional structure of the global trading system is the WTO since the WTO is the only international economic organization, where the rules for international trade are set and disputes regarding these rules are resolved. In this context, it would be useful to briefly touch on a few basic principles of the WTO. As mentioned above, the MFN principle, the National Treatment principle, the emphasis on open, predictable and transparent trade, and the principle of Special and Differential Treatment for Developing Countries can be said to reflect the most important principles and understandings of the WTO. Therefore, these rules and control mechanisms established by the WTO reflect neoliberal understanding and serve the implementation of neoliberal trade policies on a global scale.

13 Winham, G., & Lanoszka, A. (2001). Institutional development of the WTO. In A. M. Rugman & G. Boyd (Eds.), *The World Trade Organization in the new global economy* (pp. 53–71). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Transition from GATT to WTO: A Neoliberal Shift?

As Hopewell¹⁴ notes the creation of the WTO marked a significant transformation in the governance of the global trading system, a shift that scholars have described as a transition from “embedded liberalism”¹⁵ to “neoliberalism”¹⁶.

As can be seen in Table 1, this transition process provides crucial clues regarding how the institutional framework of the global trade system is shaped and how it integrates with neoliberal policies.

14 Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press.

15 Ikenberry, G. J. (1992). “A World Economy Restored: Expert Consensus and the Anglo-American Postwar Settlement,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1, pp. 289–321; Ruggie, J. G. (1982). “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36, no. 2, pp. 379–415.

16 Chorev, N. (2005). “The Institutional Project of Neo-Liberal Globalism: The Case of the WTO,” *Theory and Society* 34, no. 3, pp. 317–55; Mortensen, J. L. (2005). “The WTO and the Governance of Globalization: Dismantling the Compromise of Embedded Liberalism,” in *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order*, ed. Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey R. D. Underhill. Oxford University Press, pp. 170–82.

Table-1: Key Differences Between GATT and the WTO

Criteria	GATT (1947–1994)	WTO (Since 1995)
Legal Nature	A provisional agreement with no formal organizational status	A permanent international organization with legal personality
Scope of Coverage	Focused exclusively on trade in goods	Encompasses trade in goods, services, and intellectual property
Dispute Settlement	Relied on a non-binding, consensus-based process with limited enforcement capability	Features a more structured and binding Dispute Settlement Mechanism with time limits
Institutional Structure	No permanent institutional framework or secretariat	Structured with permanent bodies such as the Ministerial Conference and General Council
Decision-Making Process	Decisions were often based on consensus, but lacked clarity and consistency	Operates primarily through consensus, yet under a clearer and more disciplined framework
Binding Commitments	Allowed for significant flexibility in implementation of commitments	Members are subject to more comprehensive and binding commitments
Membership	Applied by a smaller number of contracting parties (128 at its peak)	Comprises 166 member countries with broader global representation
Duration and Continuity	Functioned temporarily until replaced by the WTO	Established as a permanent organization to govern global trade

Although institutional continuity and change, criticisms of the development perspective¹⁷, and discussions on the sovereignty of nation-states are undeniably important in this transformation, this paper will attempt to scrutinize this transition process under the following four subheadings: 1) Membership Mechanism, 2) Strengthened Dispute Settlement Mechanism, 3) Expansion into New Areas, and 4) Power Dynamics.

Membership Mechanism

In assessing whether the process that evolved from the signing of the GATT to the establishment of the WTO was a neoliberal transformation, the membership mechanism is a central point to consider. Because the membership processes of the WTO stand out as a critical element in understanding how the rules of the organization govern integration with the global economy, and especially, how these rules affect developing countries. First of all, it should be stated that while GATT has the nature of an international agreement, the WTO has the identity of an international organization. To elaborate on this issue; when the text of GATT 1947 is examined, it is seen that the signatories of this text are referred to as “Contracting parties” but rather in the Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, the signatories of this agreement are referred to as “members”.

Hence, it would be useful at this point to touch on the changes in the institutional structure in order to better grasp the membership mechanism. Initially, it was stated that the WTO, unlike the GATT, had a legal personality and organizational entity that can be claimed to be equivalent to the IMF or the World Bank.¹⁸ Secondly, during the

17 These criticisms can be listed as follows: 1) It is claimed by the Global South countries that WTO rules provide advantages to developed economies, leaving developing countries behind in areas such as agricultural subsidies and intellectual property rights. 2) It is argued that negotiations within the scope of the WTO are often shaped by the priorities of more developed countries and groups of countries (such as the EU, the US and Japan). Therefore, it is argued that they reflect the interests of the decisive actors of the global trading system rather than the development needs of developing countries.

18 Winham, G., & Lanoszka, A. (2001). Institutional development of the WTO. In A. M. Rugman & G. Boyd (Eds.), *The World Trade Organization in the new global economy* (pp. 53–71). Edward Elgar Publishing.

GATT period, which covered the years 1947-1994, there was a more flexible membership process and there were fewer binding regulations regarding compliance with the rules of the GATT compared to the WTO. With the transition to the WTO, the membership process became much more complex and held long duration, and it became mandatory for new members to fully comply with the WTO's comprehensive international trade rules. Thus, it would not be wrong to claim that the membership process was used as a tool to trigger neoliberal reforms for countries in the transition to a market economy.

The membership mechanism can be briefly evaluated under two headings: pre-accession and post-accession. Before accession, countries willing to become members of the WTO are expected to undertake neoliberal reforms such as reducing the implementation of tariffs, liberalizing market regulations, and reducing subsidies. The membership process of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as China), which became a WTO member in 2001 after a 15-year negotiation process, brought about a significant wave of reforms in the country. Similarly, the Russian Federation, which became a member in 2012, had to conduct more economic liberalization in this process.

When examined from the viewpoint of whether the transition from the GATT to the WTO is a neoliberal shift in terms of the membership mechanism, it can be set forth that the WTO membership process actually serves as a filter that strengthens the neoliberal economic understanding. When issues such as the WTO membership criteria and the limitations imposed on member states regarding the functioning of their economies after membership are considered, it can be stated that a neoliberal transformation has taken place in the establishment process of the WTO.

Strengthened Dispute Settlement Mechanism

The World Trade Organization also serves as a forum for the resolution of trade disputes among its Members, in accordance with the procedures set forth in the Understanding on Rules and Procedures Governing the

Settlement of Disputes (DSU). In this context, the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) governs the resolution of disputes in the WTO. Unlike others, the DSB establishes panels of independent experts for the resolution of disputes, accepts the panel's decisions, and monitors the implementation of the decisions taken.¹⁹

When its evolution throughout history is examined, it is seen that the DSB has been significantly strengthened and has become binding for the parties. This paper argues that this change in the process from GATT to WTO enabled (or aimed at this) the multilateral trading system to operate within a more rule-based and predictable framework, while at the same time strengthening the neoliberal economic system. With regard to decisions taken, there are crucial differences in the sense that GATT was more of à la carte structure and was negotiated as “codes” that countries could decide whether to sign or not, but it is not possible to mention such a situation after the establishment of the WTO.²⁰

Secondly, again in the GATT process - in terms of dispute resolution - courts could be established and decisions could be made based on the consent of the parties. For example, during the GATT period, panel decisions were only advisory and progress could usually be achieved through diplomatic negotiations. With the establishment of the WTO, it is almost impossible to prevent the establishment of dispute settlement panels, the acceptance of panel reports and the authorization of retaliation in case of non-implementation of dispute settlement decisions.²¹

Thirdly, the empowerment of the DSB led to a greater emphasis on market mechanisms and the private sector in WTO members. However, this shift also resulted in a significant narrowing of policy space for developing countries, particularly in terms of development-oriented strategies. Many of these countries, which had previously relied on tools such as subsidies, import-substitution policies, or regulatory protections to support their industrialization efforts, began to face

19 WTO E-Learning. (2017). “Dispute Settlement Understanding”, Online Course of Overview of the WTO Agreements.

20 Ibid.

21 Hoekman, B. M., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2016). *The World Trade Organization: Law, economics, and politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

increasing constraints under WTO rules. The binding and rule-based nature of the DSB made it more difficult for them to pursue state-led economic interventions aimed at promoting local industries or ensuring food security. In particular, major trading powers like the United States and the European Union frequently brought the agricultural support programs of developing countries before the DSB, challenging their compatibility with global trade norms. This practice, while developed countries continued to maintain their own extensive agricultural subsidies, created a perception of double standards and contributed to growing dissatisfaction among developing members regarding the fairness and inclusiveness of the multilateral trading system.

To summarize, it can be comprehended that the system, which was flexible and based on diplomatic negotiations during the GATT period, was shaped on a more legally binding and stricter structure with the WTO. In addition, a DSB has emerged that aims to strengthen the neoliberal order, especially by limiting the national policies of developing countries and by making attempts to reduce state interventions in the multilateral trading system.

Expansion into New Areas

As can be seen in Table 2, there were several rounds in the transition from GATT to WTO, and the topics covered by these rounds gradually diversified and spread to areas such as non-tariff measures, intellectual property, services, textiles and agriculture.²²

22 WTO. (2025). The GATT years: From Havana to Marrakesh. https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact4_e.htm

Table-2: GATT Trade Rounds²³

Year	Place/name	Subjects covered	Countries
1947	Geneva	Tariffs	23
1949	Annecy	Tariffs	13
1951	Torquay	Tariffs	38
1956	Geneva	Tariffs	26
1960-1961	Geneva Dillon Round	Tariffs	26
1964-1967	Geneva Kennedy Round	Tariffs and anti-dumping measures	62
1973-1979	Geneva Tokyo Round	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, “framework” agreements	102
1986-1994	Geneva Uruguay Round	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, rules, services, intellectual property, dispute settlement, textiles, agriculture, creation of WTO, etc	123

This expansion has attempted to solidify the place of neoliberal economic policies in the global economic system. At this point, the point to consider is whether it is possible to claim that the transition from GATT to WTO is really a neoliberal transition. Before answering this question - in the context of this expansion - it would not be wrong to ask what has changed from GATT to WTO.

At the beginning while GATT was an agreement that focused more on trade in goods, with the establishment of the WTO, this scope has expanded towards the areas mentioned above. In addition, while GATT focused on issues such as tariff reductions and reductions of barriers to trade, the WTO ensured the spread of neoliberal reforms to wider sectors by expanding the scope of the rules. Moreover, agreements such as GATS and Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), which were not on the agenda during the

23 World Trade Organization (WTO), *Understanding the WTO: The GATT Years: from Havana to Marrakesh*, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact4_e.htm

GATT process but came to the fore with the WTO, accelerated the global integration process. In this process, three main changes that came along with the WTO and global integration process can be touched upon.

Firstly, sectors such as telecommunications, health, education and finance have ensured the spread of neoliberal economic policies with the contribution of GATS. In this way, the necessity of opening up to global markets has inevitably emerged for developing countries. The fact that public services such as education and health, which were almost entirely considered as basic duties of the state until the establishment of the WTO, were regulated within the scope of these agreements and opening up to global markets can be considered as an indicator of neoliberal change.

Secondly, with TRIPS, the patent rights of multinational pharmaceutical companies have been strengthened and the intellectual property rights of these companies have been protected, but on the other hand, accessing these drugs and the technology related to drugs have become a challenge to developing countries. This has naturally led to the perception and criticism of intellectual property rights as a subject serving the commercial interests of the developed countries.

Thirdly, it is believed that neoliberal economic policies have been included in investment-related processes with the Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMs), further reducing the influence of states on international investors. The criticisms to be considered in this context include the provision of special incentives to foreign investors, removal of domestic production obligations, and weakening of mechanisms to protect national industries (especially for developing countries).

To summarize, compared to GATT, which was a relatively narrow agreement with a weaker authority over the contracting parties, the establishment of the WTO involved a dramatic expansion of the abovementioned rules on international trade to new areas.²⁴ It is understood that neoliberal policies were reflected in many areas of international trade with GATS, TRIPS and TRIMs and that state

24 Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press.

intervention was attempted to be reduced. For instance, while the GATT rules, which primarily targeted “border” policies (such as customs duties, tariffs etc.), did not interfere significantly with the autonomy of states and domestic policymaking, the scope of “cross-border” measures was expanded with the WTO rules.²⁵ As a result, the expansion of the WTO to new areas contributed to the stronger institutionalization of the multilateral trading system within the neoliberal order.

Power Dynamics

The transition process from GATT to WTO has also had significant effects on global balances of power. First, it would be appropriate to focus on decision-making mechanisms. As is known, there is veto power in two of the three major international economic organizations (World Bank Group and IMF). In WTO, decisions are generally made by consensus. However, there are also objections to this general principle. As Hoekman and Mavroidis²⁶ state, consensus does not mean unanimity; it means that no delegation represented in a meeting object to a proposal. In some cases (such as waivers), a qualified majority may be requested. When the literature is examined, it can be stated that new powers from the developing world are at the top of the decision-making processes within the WTO and play important roles in shaping the Doha Development Round.²⁷ However, the demands of developing countries to remove agricultural subsidies were not met in the Doha Development Round, and intellectual property protection regulations such as TRIPS were strengthened.²⁸

25 Ibid.

26 Hoekman, B. M., & Mavroidis, P. C. (2016). *The World Trade Organization: Law, economics, and politics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

27 Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press, pp. 27-35, 55-61; Narlikar, A. (2010). *New powers: How to become one and how to manage them*. London: Hurst Publishers, pp. 1-8; Steinberg, R. H. (2002). In the shadow of law or power? Consensus-based bargaining and outcomes in the GATT/WTO. *International Organization*, 56(2), pp. 340-350; Wilkinson, R. (2006). *The WTO: Crisis and the governance of global trade*. London: Routledge, pp. 23-30.

28 Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press, pp. 119-125, 139-145; Sell, S. K. (2003). *Private power, public law: The globalization of intellectual property rights*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 12-20; Jawara, F., & Kwa, A. (2003). *Behind the scenes at the WTO: The real world of international trade negotiations*. Zed Books, pp. 77-85.

Second, while it is known that negotiations during the GATT period were mostly on specific issues and progressed with the parties making mutual concessions with the WTO, these negotiations are seen to be shaped more according to the priorities of important economic power blocks such as the United States and the EU. During the periods when negotiations slowed down in the multilateral trade system, developed countries turned to bilateral and regional trade agreements within the framework of the WTO Agreements (Article XXIV of the GATT, Article V of the GATS, and the Enabling Clause (paragraph 2c). It can also state that in this way, the role of the WTO in global trade management was weakened and a global trade appearance in favor of developed country economies emerged.

Third, it would be appropriate to mention that China, which became a WTO member in 2001 after a long negotiation period of 15 years, has grown by approximately 10% in the last 40 years. China has reached a stronger position in the multilateral trade system with the policies it has implemented to open up to the outside world and has been able to benefit from the current situation by defending the principles of this system. China, which defined itself as a “developing country” during its WTO membership process and continues to do so, has gained various economic and commercial benefits by benefiting from this status, which has received criticism, especially from the United States, and the WTO has become the arena of this power struggle.

In summary, although the decision-making structure of the WTO is often regarded as more equitable compared to other major international economic organizations, this view is largely grounded in its reliance on the principle of consensus, where each member—regardless of economic size or contribution—formally holds one vote, and decisions are typically made in the absence of formal opposition. This model differs significantly from the governance systems of the IMF and the World Bank Group, where voting power is distributed according to members’ financial quotas, effectively granting developed countries, especially the United States and Western Europe, dominant influence over

institutional outcomes.²⁹ Nevertheless, shifting global power dynamics have shaped the evolution of the WTO. As the institution initially reflected the preferences and leadership of the U.S. and the European Union, the growing prominence of emerging economies—particularly China—has altered both the internal balance and external perception of the WTO. Rising tensions, especially due to the U.S. critique of the dispute settlement mechanism and concerns over unequal benefits, have further intensified debates over the legitimacy of global trade rules. At the same time, it can be argued that the WTO, rather than serving solely as a neutral forum, has also played a role in institutionalizing neoliberal norms and reinforcing the structural dominance of both established and emerging economic powers in the governance of global trade.³⁰

Neoliberal Principles in WTO Agreements and Policies

From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, international organizations are not merely passive arenas where states negotiate, but entities that exercise agency by shaping norms, procedures, and expectations in the international system. In this sense, the WTO functions as more than just a technical or legal body—it plays an active role in structuring the global trade regime and influencing the behavior of its member states.³¹ In particular, the WTO reflects and reinforces the principles of neoliberal economic thought, which gained global prominence through the pro-market reforms initiated during the 1980s by leaders such as Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. These reforms emphasized trade liberalization, deregulation, and a limited role for the state in the economy, ideals that the WTO's rules and dispute settlement mechanisms continue to embody and promote.

29 Woods, N. (2003). *The United States and the International Financial Institutions: Power and Influence within the World Bank and the IMF*. In R. Foot, N.J. MacFarlane & M. Mastanduno (Eds.), *US Hegemony and International Organizations* (pp. 92–114). Oxford University Press, pp. 92-94; Buira, A. (2005). *The Governance of the IMF in a Global Economy*. London: Anthem Press, pp. 10-14.

30 Hopewell, K. (2016). *Breaking the WTO: How emerging powers disrupted the neoliberal project*. Stanford University Press, pp. 55-68.

31 Barnett, M. & Finnemore, M. (2004). *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*. Cornell University Press, pp. 3-5.

This understanding, which emphasizes the free market economy, is based on the liberalization of trade, minimization of state intervention, and encouragement of privatization and deregulation policies. When the founding agreements and various policy documents of the WTO are examined, one can come to the conclusion that these neoliberal principles have been institutionalized in different ways. For example, the process of reducing tariffs, preventing discrimination (MFN and national treatment principles), liberalization of services sectors and global protection of intellectual property rights (TRIPS) can be considered as reflections of neoliberal principles in WTO Agreements and policies.

Considering the WTO's broader function in institutionalizing pro-market norms within the global political economy, it is clear that its legal texts and policy framework embody several key elements of neoliberal ideology. Rather than providing an exhaustive analysis of all neoliberal features embedded in the WTO system, this study will focus on three fundamental principles that most clearly reflect this orientation and have had a notable impact on member states' trade policies: Trade Liberalization, Non-Discrimination Principles, and Privatization and Deregulation. These principles are selected because they offer the most direct insight into how the WTO contributes to the entrenchment of neoliberal economic governance on a global scale.

Trade Liberalization

Trade liberalization is one of the fundamental principles of neoliberal economic policies and aims to ensure that the global economic system operates within the framework of free market principles. To reiterate, the neoliberal economic understanding advocates that state intervention in the economy should be minimized and that free trade should be paved in line with the interests of market actors. In this context, although trade liberalization policies implemented by the WTO are actually a continuation of the GATT, the scope and depth of the WTO have reached a much more advanced level than the GATT.

When the WTO legislation is considered, it can be seen that many binding agreements under the WTO umbrella include not only trade in goods but also many sectors such as services, intellectual property rights, investments, services and public procurement. It can be stated that this process is directly consistent with neoliberalism's goal of minimizing the economic role of the state and giving priority to market actors.³²

GATT 1994 encouraged WTO member countries to refrain from protectionist approaches through neoliberal regulations such as the removal of import quotas, reduction of tariffs and limitation of subsidies. Moreover, through GATS, sectors within the scope of GATS were opened to international investors and the way was paved for multinational companies to operate more freely in this field. In this context, it can be claimed that GATS embedded the privatization and deregulation principles of neoliberal policies into the international trade system.³³

It is also useful to mention TRIPS regarding the process of trade liberalization. As is known, TRIPS aimed to strengthen property rights in favor of market actors. It can be claimed that in this way, the control of companies, especially in developed countries, over technological and cultural production increased and that this was in line with the neoliberal understanding's "protection of capital" and "improvement of investment environment" principles.³⁴

As a result, the WTO agreements and policies for trade liberalization can be asserted to be in strong harmony with the core principles of neoliberalism. It can also be claimed that through these agreements and policies, the institutionalization of the market-based global political economy is ensured and the economic autonomy of states is restricted,

32 Cohn, T. H. (2012). *Global political economy: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.

33 Shadlen, K. C. (2005). Exchanging development for market access? Deep integration and industrial policy under multilateral and regional-bilateral trade agreements. *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(5), 750–775.

34 May, C. (2000). *A global political economy of intellectual property rights: The new enclosures?* Routledge.

paving the way for the adoption of neoliberal norms on a global scale. On the other hand, it is increasingly discussed that this process may lead to results that increase economic and social inequalities, especially for developing countries. This issue constitutes the main theme of the next sub-section.

Non-Discrimination Principles

The principle of non-discrimination is one of the most fundamental principles of the WTO, allowing global trade to be conducted fairly, equally and freely. This principle has two main components: The Most Favored Nation Principle and the National Treatment Principle. At this point, it is useful to touch upon the basic features of these two principles and their practical effects on international trade.

The implications of the MFN principle are particularly significant in shaping the dynamics of global trade. By requiring WTO members to extend the same trade advantages—such as tariff reductions or market access commitments—to all other members, the MFN principle promotes predictability, transparency, and equality in international trade relations. This framework discourages discriminatory practices and reduces the likelihood of trade wars, as countries are prevented from offering preferential treatment to selected partners. However, the principle also limits the flexibility of member states to tailor their trade policies based on strategic or geopolitical considerations. For instance, while FTAs are permitted as exceptions under Article XXIV of the GATT, they inherently contradict the MFN principle by creating exclusive trading blocks. Thus, while MFN fosters inclusivity and non-discrimination, it can also generate tensions between multilateralism and regionalism in trade governance.

The first abovementioned feature of the MFN principle, ‘preventing discrimination’, helps to liberalize global trade and create equal opportunities for parties. Secondly, the MFN principle aims to prevent developed economies from gaining advantage over small economies in order to establish a fair competitive environment. In this way, it is

targeted to enable the least developed and developing countries to trade with developed countries on equal terms. Thirdly, the MFN principle aims to ensure the stability and transparency of the global trading system. For instance, it is known that when an advantage is provided by any country to another country in trade agreements, this advantage will also apply to other countries.

The National Treatment principle plays a crucial role in preventing protectionist practices in domestic markets. By requiring countries to treat imported goods and services no less favorably than their domestic counterparts after they have entered the domestic market, this principle helps create a level playing field between foreign and local producers. As a result, it reduces the likelihood of countries using internal regulations (such as taxes, technical standards, or licensing requirements) as disguised barriers to trade. Moreover, it enhances the credibility and predictability of the multilateral trading system by reassuring exporters that their products will not be discriminated against once they enter a foreign market. However, in practice, challenges may arise in its implementation, especially when governments use legitimate regulatory measures—such as environmental or health standards—that may disproportionately affect foreign products. Therefore, the National Treatment principle also generates ongoing debates regarding the balance between trade liberalization and regulatory autonomy.

As stated above, while the first feature of the National Treatment Principle aims for equal competition between domestic and foreign goods, the second feature focuses on the liberalization of trade. Thus, the removal of trade barriers that imported goods may face in domestic markets not only facilitates the entry of foreign products, but also ensures that domestic producers compete with foreign firms on equal terms. The third feature of the National Treatment Principle is to prevent states from taking excessive protectionist measures against foreign goods in the domestic market. In this way, it aims to prevent practices such as high customs duties/tariffs or subsidies for domestic producers.

According to the neoliberal perspective, free trade and market economy produce the most efficient economic results. In this context, the MFN

and National Treatment principles encourage the liberalization of the multilateral trading system. Neoliberalism also aims to eliminate the barriers to free trade and to ensure that trade is carried out fairly by advocating the minimization of state intervention. Although it is believed that the principles mentioned above serve these goals, there are also criticisms in the literature arguing that these principles may increase inequality on a global scale.³⁵

Privatization and Deregulation

Neoliberalism claims that the market is a self-sufficient, efficient and welfare-producing mechanism. Based on this understanding, as previously stated, it advocates limiting the state's intervention in the economy and its productive role and redistributing resources on the basis of private property. From this perspective, it can be indicated that privatization and deregulation have an important place in this process.³⁶

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On the other hand, although the WTO does not explicitly impose privatization, it can be regarded as a regulatory actor that institutionalizes a specific type of intervention—namely, the promotion of market-oriented reforms—by advancing the liberalization of trade and discouraging direct state involvement in the economy. The state's intervention tools in the economic field have been significantly limited, especially through regulations on investment measures (TRIMs), trade in services (GATS) and subsidies.³⁷

As stated above, although the WTO does not have a direct obligation regarding privatization, there are regulations stating that public enterprises should be subject to competition rules. In this context, when the GATS text, which came into force in 1995, is considered, it is seen that this situation is clearly expressed in Articles 1 and 8.

35 Bhagwati, J. (2002). *Free trade today*. Princeton University Press; Baldwin, R. E. (2006). Multilateralising regionalism: Spaghetti bowls as building blocks on the path to global free trade. *The World Economy*, 29(11), 1451–1518.

36 Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

37 Hoekman, B., & Kostecki, M. (2009). *The political economy of the world trading system: WTO and beyond* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Thus, the increasing commercialization of various sectors that operate within the logic of public service, such as health, education and energy, is encouraged. It can be claimed that the definition of public services as “commercial services” creates a basis for the privatization of these areas. It can also set forth that this tendency has resulted in the opening of public infrastructure to international capital, especially in developing countries.³⁸

Deregulation can be defined as the process of reducing or removing regulatory interventions of public authorities towards the market. Several agreements and normative structures of the WTO have the function of limiting the regulatory role of the state. This situation manifests itself in various ways. Firstly, for instance, with the TRIMs Agreement, restrictions have been imposed on development priority regulations such as domestic production and technology transfer. In other words, even if there is no agreement on international investments within the scope of the WTO, an effort has been made to prevent international investors from being discriminated against against the agreements such as TRIMs and GATS.

Secondly, it would be appropriate to mention the TRIPS Agreement within the scope of deregulation. With this agreement, intellectual property rights are protected very strongly and the regulatory areas for access to technology and domestic production can be narrowed. It can be stated that this situation creates a serious problem for developing countries, especially, with regard to the pharmaceutical sector.³⁹ In addition, the flexibility provided by states to domestic companies is also reduced through this agreement.

Within the scope of deregulation, it is necessary to mention the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (SCM) thirdly. With this agreement, the use of subsidies—an important policy instrument often employed by states to support specific sectors or promote industrial

38 Bakker, K. (2003). *An uncooperative commodity: Privatizing water in England and Wales*. Oxford University Press; Bayliss, K. (2002). Privatization and poverty: The distributional impact of utility privatization. *PSIRU Reports*.

39 Sell, S. K. (2003). *Private power, public law: The globalization of intellectual property rights*. Cambridge University Press.

development—has been increasingly constrained in the context of international trade rules. It is believed that subsidies, which include practices such as tax exemptions, direct financial support, low-interest loans and infrastructure support provided by the state to companies in line with the neoliberal understanding, disrupt the market mechanism. Based on this, it can be argued that that subsidies are generally regarded as “non-market incentives”. Hence, it is possible to state that the WTO’s SCM Agreement has emerged as an institutional arrangement that reflects precisely this understanding.

Contradictions and Critiques of the WTO Liberalization

Despite the neoliberal tendencies and policies of the World Trade Organization, the WTO has received criticism from several perspectives. While the vast majority of these criticisms stem from those who criticize neoliberalism, neoliberals also have criticisms of the WTO Neoliberalism. In this context, some neoliberals have criticized the WTO mechanisms by stating that they allow practices such as safeguard measures and trade remedies, and that the WTO mechanisms are still open to too much state intervention.⁴⁰

It would be appropriate to mention structural contradictions as the first subline regarding WTO Neoliberalism. Firstly, imbalances between developed and developing countries (including the least developed countries) are encountered in this context. When the literature is examined, it can be stated that the WTO’s rule-based trade system is shaped in a way that protects the commercial interests of developed countries and disadvantages developing countries. It can also be claimed that the protectionist policies implemented especially in the textile and agricultural sectors and the subsidies provided by the state limit the

40 Bello, W. (2000). *The Iron Cage: The WTO, the Bretton Woods Institutions and the South*. In B. Gills (Ed.), *Globalization and the Politics of Resistance* (pp. 285–296). Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 288-291; Bhagwati, J. (2002). *Free trade today*. Princeton University Press, pp. 69-72; Wilkinson, R. (2006). *The WTO: Crisis and the governance of global trade*. London: Routledge, pp. 99-103.

competitiveness of countries in the Southern Hemisphere.⁴¹ In this context, while the United States and the EU provide subsidies to their own agricultural producers, it is seen that developed economic structures and lobbies in the United States and the EU demand that developing countries remove the supports that they provide to their producers. Naturally, this situation has led to an asymmetric liberalization process within the scope of globalization.

Under the structural contradictions, it is necessary to mention international trade rules secondly, which are stated to be in conflict with development goals. It can be stated that agreements such as TRIPS, TRIMs and GATS limit the sovereignty of developing countries over their development strategies. For example, with the strict protection of intellectual property rights within the scope of TRIPS, international public interest in the fields of health and technology can remain in the background. In this context, the examples of South Africa and India reveal the social effects of the WTO rules in terms of access to AIDS drugs.⁴² The discussion on patent rights for vaccines in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which the whole world has recently experienced, is another example in the literature.

It would not be wrong to mention the institutional democracy deficit and participation problem, thirdly, under structural contradictions. As stated in previous sections, decisions in the WTO are made by consensus and are considered to have a more equitable structure than other international economic organizations. However, it can be claimed that the dominance and effectiveness of developed countries and groups of countries are decisive in the negotiations. In support of this proposition, factors such as the inadequacy of trained technical experts, the weakness of institutional capacities and resource constraints of developing countries

41 Clapp, J. (2006). WTO agriculture negotiations: Implications for the global South. *Third World Quarterly*, 27(4), 563–569; Stiglitz, J. E., & Charlton, A. (2005). *Fair Trade for All: How Trade Can Promote Development*. Oxford University Press, pp. 61–65; Chang, H.-J. (2002). *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Anthem Press, pp. 124–126; Shadlen, K. C. (2005). Exchanging development for market access? Deep integration and industrial policy under multilateral and regional-bilateral trade agreements. *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(5), pp. 750–775.

42 Sell, S. K. (2003). *Private power, public law: The globalization of intellectual property rights*. Cambridge University Press.

are expressed in this context. It can be stated that such issues cause the WTO to face problems of representation and legitimacy.⁴³

It would be appropriate to touch upon the criticisms of the WTO Neoliberalism, which consist of neoliberal crises and reactions, as the second subline. The first of these criticisms are the protests against the summit held in Seattle in 1999 and the anti-globalization movement. Among the most striking impressions that many people have about the WTO are the photographs and videos of the Seattle demonstrations. In addition, it can be asserted that the rapid reaction of the United States National Guard in controlling the protests against the WTO, which was a very new international organization at the time, was an action that damaged the image of the WTO.⁴⁴ The protests held in Seattle in 1999 by civil society organizations, environmentalists and anti-globalization groups were aimed at the WTO's neglect of social, ethical and environmental dimensions. It is understood that through these protests, attention was drawn to the fact that the regulations of the WTO went far beyond international trade and affected social justice among social groups.

The second strand of the criticisms against the WTO Neoliberalism can be put forward as the Doha Development Round, which was launched in 2001. As is known, the Doha Development Round aimed to focus on the development priorities of developing countries, but significant blockages were encountered in the negotiations (especially in the areas of services and agriculture). As Baldwin⁴⁵ also states, this situation shows that the multilateral trade system has experienced a crisis and countries are turning to bilateral and regional trade agreements. Since the bilateral and regional trade agreements in question are exceptions to the basic rules of the WTO, the countries that are parties to these trade agreements are not obliged to give the commercial concessions in the signed trade agreements to other WTO members. This naturally leads

43 Jawara, F., & Kwa, A. (2003). *Behind the scenes at the WTO: The real world of international trade negotiations*. Zed Books.

44 Collins, D. (2015). *The World Trade Organization: A beginner's guide*. Oneworld Publications.

45 Baldwin, R. (2016). *The great convergence: Information technology and the new globalization*. Harvard University Press.

to developing countries and least developed countries not being able to fully benefit from the equality brought by the MFN principle.

The third criticism brought against the WTO Neoliberalism within the context of this paper is related to the COVID-19 pandemic and supply chain vulnerabilities. As was seen in the pandemic process affecting the entire world, the structural weaknesses of the neoliberal trading system based on global value chains have been strikingly revealed. Supply shocks experienced in medicine, medical equipment and basic food products have led to the questioning of externally dependent production models. In this process, it is also known that production disruptions experienced in leading production centers such as China have caused supply disruptions and price fluctuations on a global scale. Based on this, the issue of excessive dependence on global supply chains has been brought into discussion in the context of national security and strategic autonomy.⁴⁶

Moreover, the traditional neoliberal approach, which states that production should be shifted to low-cost countries as a rational choice, has shown (as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic) that this choice lacks flexibility and resilience in times of crisis. Thus, some states have set self-sufficiency targets in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, healthcare products, the defense industry and agriculture, and have begun to develop strategies for partial separation from global supply chains. On the other hand, under the current WTO rules, such industrial policies that encourage domestic production are seen as “trade-distorting” measures, and these practices are restricted. As stated in the literature, this situation creates a tension between international trade rules and economic security policies.⁴⁷

In summary, the role of the WTO, one of the leading actors in neoliberal policies and globalization, has turned into a structure that is increasingly questioned within the changing global political economy. In the face of widening global inequalities, growing demands for social

46 Evenett, S. J. (2020). Sicken thy neighbour: The initial trade policy response to COVID-19. *The World Economy*, 43(4), 828–839.

47 Evenett, S. J., & Winters, L. A. (2021). *Preparing for the next global pandemic: A trade bargain to secure supplies and strengthen the WTO* (CEPR Policy Insight No. 114).

justice, and crises of democratic legitimacy, the neoliberal paradigm underpinning the WTO appears to be undergoing a renewed phase of critical reassessment.

Conclusion

The establishment of the World Trade Organization in 1995 did not only mean the restructuring of the multilateral trading system; it also referred to the institutionalization of neoliberal understanding on a global scale. Neoliberal norms such as deregulation, limitation of state intervention, free market principles and intellectual property rights have become the fundamental building blocks of the international trading system through the institutional structure of the WTO. From this point on, it is understood that the WTO goes far beyond determining the rules of international trade.

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However, the neoliberal framework of the WTO has witnessed some structural contradictions since 1995. For instance, while developing countries continued their subsidies in sectors such as agriculture, the fact that developing countries were subjected to harsh pressures to open their markets in the same sector has led to an asymmetric liberalization process. This situation naturally shows that liberalization is not equal and reciprocal, undermines the normative legitimacy of the WTO and calls into question the claim of establishing a fair and development-friendly trade system on the global scale.

In addition, global crises such as the 2008-2009 global financial and economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising geopolitical tensions have clearly revealed the vulnerabilities of the neoliberal trade regime defended by the WTO. In this way, concepts such as economic security, protection of strategic sectors, and domestic production have once again become central to state policies. It is believed that these developments contradict the basic assumptions of neoliberalism regarding international trade and force the WTO to re-evaluate its functionality.

In the light of these, an increase in social reactions to the WTO rules and practices is considered to indicate that the organization is experiencing a legitimacy crisis not only economically but also socio-politically. The criticisms that became visible after the protests in Seattle in 1999 emphasize that international trade should not only protect the rights of multinational corporations, but also farmers, workers, and environmental damage should not be neglected. From this perspective, it is believed that the need for reform in the WTO, which has been expressed vehemently since 2017, should not be only limited to technical structural transformations, but a deeper transformation is needed on the axis of inclusiveness, social justice and sustainability.

As a result, it would not be wrong to evaluate the establishment of the WTO as an institutional reflection of the neoliberal economic system. However, the developments that have occurred and that are occurring in the meantime seriously test the sustainability of the global structure in its current form. As the last word, this paper advocates that the future of the WTO will depend not only on market efficiency, but also on the capacity and opportunity to establish a more balanced and inclusive global trading system.

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